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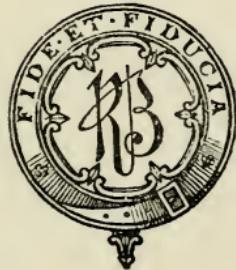
JOHNNY LUDLOW.

“We spake of many a vanished scene,
Of what we once had thought and said,
Of what had been, and might have been,
And who was changed, and who was dead.”

LONGFELLOW.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
NEW BURLINGTON STREET,
Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty.
1874.

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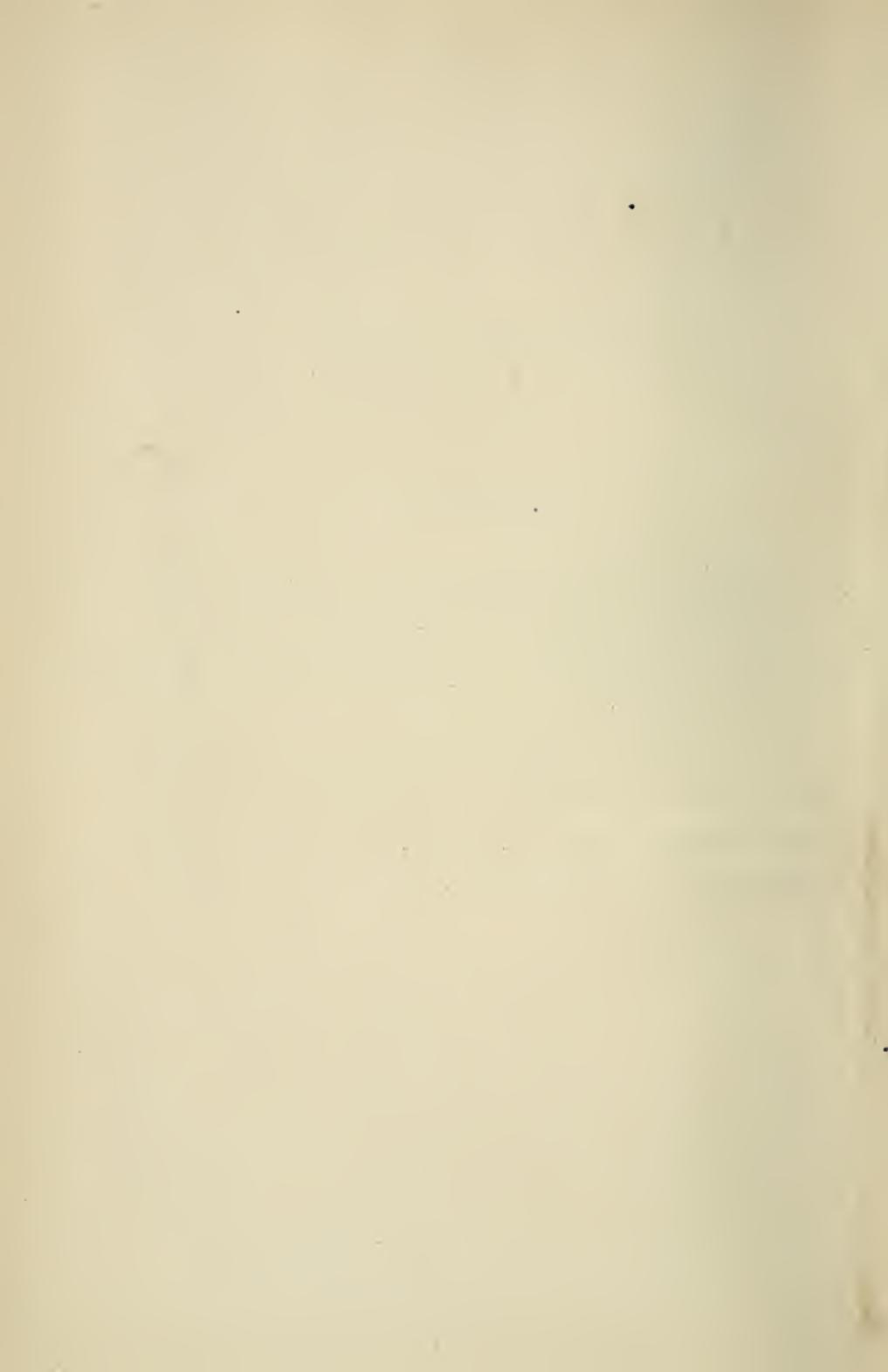
*These Stories, by "JOHNNY LUDLOW," are
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JOHNNY LUDLOW.

X.

A HUNT BY MOONLIGHT.

THIS is another tale of our school life. It is not much in itself, you may say, but it was to lead to events that lasted. Curious enough, it is, to sit down and trace out the beginning of things: when we *can* trace it; but it is often too remote for us.

Mrs. Frost died, and the summer holidays were prolonged in consequence. September was not far off when we met again, and gigs and carriages went bowling up with us and our boxes.

Sanker was in the large class room when we got in. He looked up for a minute, and turned his head away. Tod and I went up to him. He did shake hands, and it was as much as you could say. I don't think he was the sort of fellow to bear malice; but it took time to bring him round if once offended.

Sanker had gone home with us to Dyke Manor when the holidays began. He belonged

to a family in Wales (very poor they were now), and was a distant cousin of Mrs. Todhetley's. Before he had been with us long, a matter occurred that put him out, and he betook himself away from the Manor there and then. But I do not intend to go into that history now.

Things had been queer at school towards the close of the past term. Petty pilferings took place: articles and money alike disappeared. A thief was among us, and no mistake: but we did not know where to look for him. It was to be hoped that the same thing would not occur again.

"My father and Mrs. Todhetley are in the drawing-room," said Tod. "They are asking to see you."

Sanker hesitated; but he went at last. The interview softened things a little, for he was civil to us when he came back again.

"What's that about the plants?" he asked of me.

I told him what. They had been destroyed in some unaccountable manner. "Whether it was done intentionally, or whether the moving them into the hall and back again did it, is not positively decided; I don't suppose it ever will be. You ought to have come over to that ball, Sanker, after all of us writing to press it."

"Well," he said, coldly, "I don't care for balls. Monk was suspected, was he not?"

"Yes. Some of us suspect him still. He

was savage at being accused of——but never mind that"—and I pulled myself up in sudden recollection. "Monk has left, and we have engaged another gardener. Jenkins is not good for much."

"Hallo! What, has *he* come back?"

Ned Sanker was looking at the door as he spoke. Two of them were coming in, who must have arrived at the same time—Vale and Lacketer. They were new ones, so to say, both having entered only the past Easter. Vale was a tall, quiet fellow, with a fair, good-looking face and mild blue eyes; his friends lived at Vale Farm, about two miles off. Lacketer had sleek black hair, and a sharp nose; he had only an aunt, and was from Oxfordshire. I didn't like him. He had a way of cringing to those of us who were born to position in the world; but any poor friendless chap, who had nothing but himself and his work to get on by, he put upon shamefully. As for him, we couldn't find out that he'd ever had any relations at all, except the aunt.

I looked at Sanker, to see which he spoke of; his eyes were fixed on Vale with a stare. Vale had not been going to leave, that the school knew of.

"Why are you surprised that he has come back, Sanker?"

"Because I—didn't suppose he *would*," said Sanker, with a pause where I have put it, and

an uncommonly strong emphasis on the "would."

It was just as though he had known something about Vale. Flashing across my memory came the mysterious avowal Sanker had made at our house about the discovery of the thief at school; and I now connected the one with the other. They call me a muff, I know, but I cannot help my thoughts.

"Sanker! was *he* the thief?"

"Hold your tongue, Ludlow," returned Sanker, in a fright. "I told you I'd give him a chance again, didn't I? But I never thought he would come back to take it."

"I would have believed it of any fellow rather than of Vale."

Sanker turned his face sharp, and looked at me. "Oh, would you?" said he, after a pause. "Well, then, you'd *better* believe it of any other. Mind you do. It will be the safer line, Johnny Ludlow."

He walked away right into a group of them, as if afraid of my saying more. I turned out at the door leading to the playground, and came upon Tod in the porch.

"What was that you and Sanker were saying about Vale, Johnny?"

I was aware that I ought not to tell him; I knew I ought not: but I *did*. Tod read me always as one reads a book, and I had never attempted to keep from him any earthly thing.

“ Sanker says it was Vale. About the things, lost last half. He told me, you know, that he had discovered who it was that took them.”

“ What, he the thief! Vale?”

“ Hush, Tod. Give him another chance ; as Sanker says.”

Tod rushed out of the porch with a bound. He had heard a movement on the other side of the trellis-work, but was only in time to catch a glimpse of the tassel of a cap disappearing round the corner.

We went in for noise at Worcester House just as much as they do at other schools ; but not this afternoon. Mrs. Frost had been a favourite, and Sanker told us about her funeral. Things seemed to wear a mournful look. The servants were in black, the doctor was in jet black, even to his gaiters. He wore the old style of dress always, knee breeches and buckles : but I have mentioned this before. We used to call him old Frost ; this afternoon we said “ the Doctor.”

“ You can’t think what it was like while the house was shut up,” said Sanker. “ Coal-pits are jolly to it. I never saw the Doctor until the funeral. Being the only fellow at school, was, I suppose, the reason they asked me to go to it. He cried so over the grave.”

“ Fancy old Frost crying!” interrupted Lacketer.

“ I cried too,” avowed Sanker, in a short

sharp tone, as if he disapproved of the remark ; and it silenced Lacketer. " She had been ailing a long while, as we all knew, but she only grew very ill at the last, she told me."

" When did you see her ? "

" Two days before she died. Hall came to me, saying I was to go up. It was on Wednesday at sunset. The hot red sun was shining right into the room, and she sat back from it on the sofa in a white gown. It was very hot these holidays, and she felt at times fit to die of it : she never bore heat well."

To hear Sanker tell this was nearly as good as a play. A solemn play, I mean. None of us made the least noise as we stood round him : it seemed as if we could see Mrs. Frost's room, and her nice placid face, drawn back from the rays of the red hot sun.

" She told me to reach a little Bible that was on the drawers, and sit close to her and read a chapter," continued Sanker. " It was the seventh of St. John's Revelation ; where that verse is, that says there shall be no more hunger and thirst ; neither shall the sun light on them nor any heat. She held my hand while I read it. I had complained of the light for her, saying what a pity it was the room had no shutters. ' You see,' she said, when the chapter was read, ' how soon all discomforts here will pass away. Give my dear love to the boys when they come back,' she

went on. ‘Tell them I should like to have seen them all and said good-bye. Not good-bye for ever; be sure tell them that, Sanker: I leave them all a charge to come to me *there* in God’s good time. Not one of them must fail.’ And now I’ve told you, and it’s off my mind,’ concluded Sanker, in a different voice.

“Did you see her again?”

“When she was in her coffin. She gave me the Bible.”

Sanker took it out of his pocket. His name was written in it, “Edward Brooke Sanker, with Mary Frost’s love.” She had made him promise to read in it daily, if he began only with one verse. He did not tell us that then.

While we were looking at the writing, Bill Whitney came in. Some of them thought he had left at midsummer. Lacketer shook hands; he made much of Whitney, after the fashion of his mind and manners. Old Whitney was a baronet, and Bill would be Sir William sometime: for his elder brother, John, whom we had so much liked, was dead. Bill was good-natured, and divided hampers from home liberally.

“I don’t know why I am back,” he said, in answer to questions; “you must ask Sir John. I shall be the better for another year or two of it, he says. Who likes grapes?”

He was beginning to undo a basket he had brought: it was filled with grapes, peaches,

plums, and nectarines. Those of us who had plenty of fruit at home did not care to take much ; but the others went in for it eagerly.

“ Our peaches are finer than these, Whitney,” cried Vale.

Lacketer gave Vale a push. “ You big lout, mind your manners !” cried he. “ Don’t eat the peaches if you don’t like ‘em.”

“ So they were,” said Vale, who never answered offensively.

“ There ! that’s enough insolence from *you*.”

Old Vale was Sir John Whitney’s tenant. Of course, according to Lacketer’s creed, Vale deserved putting down for only speaking to Whitney.

“ He is right,” said Whitney, who thought no more of being his father’s son than he would of being a shopkeeper’s. “ Mr Vale’s peaches were this year the finest in the county. He sent my mother some, and she said they ought to have gone up to a London fruit-show.”

“ I never saw such peaches as Mr. Vale’s,” put in Sanker, talking at Lacketer, and not kindly. “ And the flavour was so good as the look. Mrs. Frost enjoyed those peaches to the last : it was nearly the only thing she took.”

Vale’s face shone. “ We shall always be glad at home that they were so good this year, for her sake.”

Altogether, Lacketer was shut up. He stood over Whitney, who was undoing a small desk

he had brought. Amidst the things, that lay on the ledge inside, was a thin, yellow, old-fashioned-looking coin.

"It's a guinea," said Bill Whitney. "I mean to have a hole bored in it and wear it to my watch-chain."

"I'd lock it up safely until then, Whitney," burst out Snepp, who came from Alcester. "Or it may go after the things that were lost last half-year."

Turning to glance at Sanker, I found he had left the room. Whitney was balancing the guinea on his finger.

"Fore-warned, fore-armed, Snepp," he said. "Who the thief was, I can't think; but I advise him not to begin his game again."

"Talking of warning, I should like to give one on my own score," said Tod. "By-gones may be by-gones; I don't wish to recur to them; but if I lose anything this half and can find the thief, I'll put him into the river."

"What, to drown him?"

"To duck him. I'll do it as sure as my name's Todhetley."

Vale dropped his hankerchief and stooped to pick it up again. It might have been an accident; and the redness of his face might have come of stooping; but I saw Tod did not think so. Ducking is the favourite punishment in Worcestershire for a public offender, as all the county knows. When a man misbehaves him-

self on the race-course at Worcester, they duck him in the Severn underneath.

“The guinea would not be of much use to anybody,” said Lacketer. “You couldn’t pass it.”

“Oh, couldn’t you, though!” answered Whitney. “You’d better try. It’s worth twenty-one shillings, and they might give a shilling or two in for the antiquity of the coin.”

“Gentlemen.”

We turned to see the Doctor, standing there in his deep mourning, with his subdued red face. He came in to introduce a new master.

The time went on. We missed Mrs. Frost; and Hall, the crabbed woman with the cross face, made a mean substitute. She had it all her own way now. The puddings had less jam in them, and the pies no fruit. Little Landon fell ill; and one day, after hours, when some of us went up to see him, we found him crying for Mrs. Frost. He was only seven; the youngest in the school, and made a sort of plaything of; an orphan with no friends to see to him much. Illness had used to be Mrs. Frost’s great point. Any of us that were laid by she’d sit with half the day, reading nice stories, and talking to us of good things, just as our mothers

might do. I know mine would if she had lived. However, we managed to get along in spite of Hall, hoping the Doctor would find her out and discharge her.

Matters went on quietly for some weeks. Nobody lost anything: and we had nearly forgotten there had been a doubt that we might lose, when it occurred. The loss was Tod's—rather curious, at first sight, that it should be, after his threat of what he would do. And Tod, as they all knew, was not one to break his word. It was only half a crown; but there could be no security that sovereigns would not go next. Not to speak of the disagreeable sense of feeling the thief was amidst us still, and taking to his tricks again.

Tod was writing to Evesham for some articles he wanted. Bill Whitney, knowing of this, got him to add an order for some stationery for himself: which came back in the parcel. The account, nine-and-tenpence, was made out to Tod ("Joseph Todhetley, Esquire!"), half a crown of it being Whitney's portion. Bill handed him the half-crown at once; and Tod, who was busy with his own things and had his hands full, asked him to put it on the mantelpiece.

The tea-bell rang, and they came away and forgot it. Only they two had been in the room. But others might have gone in afterwards. We were getting up from tea when

Tod called to me to go and fetch him the half-crown.

“It is on the mantel-piece, Johnny.”

I went through the passages and turned into the box-room; a place where knots of us gathered sometimes. But the mantel-piece had no half-crown on it, and I carried the news back to Tod.

“Did you take it up again, Bill?” he asked of Whitney.

“I didn’t touch it after I put it down,” said Whitney. “It was there when the tea-bell rang.”

They said I had overlooked it, and both went to the box-room. I followed slowly; thinking they should search for themselves. Which they did; and were standing with blank faces when I got in.

“It has gone after my guinea,” Whitney was saying.

“What guinea?”

“My guinea. The one you saw. That disappeared a week ago.”

Bill was not a fellow to make much row over anything; but Tod—and I, too—wondered at his having taken it so easily. Tod asked him why he had not spoken.

“Because Lacketer—who was with me when I discovered the loss—asked me to be silent for a short while,” said Whitney. “He has a suspicion; and is looking out for himself.”

“Lacketer has ?”

“He says so. I am sure he has. He thinks he could put his finger any minute on the fellow; but it would not do to accuse him without proof; and he is waiting for it.”

Tod glanced at me, and I at him, both of us thinking of Vale.

“Yesterday Lacketer lost something himself,” continued Whitney. “A shilling, I think it was. He went into a fine way over it, and said now he’d watch in earnest.”

“Who is it he suspects ?” asked Tod.

“He won’t tell me; says it would not be fair.”

“Well, I shall talk about my half-crown, if you and Lacketer choose to be silent over your losses,” said Tod, decisively. “And I’ll be as good as my word, and give the reptile a ducking if I can track him.”

He went straight to the playground. It was a fine October evening, the daylight nearly gone, and the hunter’s moon rising in the sky. Tod told about his half-crown, and the boys ceased their noise to listen to him. He talked himself into a passion, and said some stinging things. “He suspected who it was, and he heard that Lacketer suspected, and he fancied that another or two suspected, and one *knew*; and he thought, now that affairs were come to this pitch, when nothing, put for a minute out of hand, was safe, it might be better for them

all to declare their suspicions, and hunt the animal as they'd hunt a hare."

There was a pause when Tod finished. He was about the biggest and strongest in the school ; his voice was one of power, his manner ready and decisive ; so that it was just as though a master spoke. Lacketer came out from amidst them, looking white. I could see that in the twilight.

"Who says I suspect ? Speak for yourself, Todhetley. Don't bring up my name."

"Do you scent the fox, or don't you ?" roared Tod back again, not at all in a humour to be crossed. "If you *do*, you must speak, and not shirk it. Is the whole school to lie under doubt because of one black sheep ?"

Tod's concluding words were drowned in noise ; applause for him, murmurs for Lacketer. I looked round for Vale, and saw him behind the rest, as if preparing to make a run for it. That said nothing : he was one of those quiet-natured fellows who like to hold aloof from rows. When I looked back again, Sanker was standing a little forward, not far from Lacketer.

"As good speak as not, Lacketer," put in Whitney. "I don't mind telling now that that guinea of mine has been taken ; and you know you lost a shilling yourself. You say you could put your finger on the fellow."

"Speak!" "Speak!" "Speak!" came the

shouts from all quarters. And Lacketer turned whiter.

"There's no proof," he said. "I might have been mistaken in what I fancied. I *won't* speak."

"Then I shall say you are an accomplice," roared Tod, in his passion. "I intend to hunt the fellow to earth to-night, and I'll do it."

"I don't suspect anyone in particular," said Lacketer, looking as if he were run to earth himself. "There."

Great commotion. Lacketer was hustled, but got away and disappeared. Sanker went after him. Tod had been turning on Sanker, saying why didn't *he* speak.

"Half a crown is half a crown, and I mean to get mine back again," avowed Tod. "If some of you are rich enough to lose your half-crowns, I'm not. But it isn't that. Sovereigns may go next. It isn't *that*. It is the knowing we have got a light-fingered, disreputable, sneaking rat amongst us, whose proper place would be a reformatory school, not one for honest men's sons."

"Name!" "Proofs!" "Proofs!" "Name!" It was as if a very torrent had been let loose. In the midst of the lull that ensued a voice was heard, and a name.

"Vale. Harry Vale."

Harding was the one to say it: a clever, first-class boy. You might have heard a pin

drop in the surprise: and Harding went on after a minute.

"I beg to state that I do not accuse Vale myself. I know nothing whatever about the case. But I have reason to think Vale's name is the one that has been mentioned in connection with the losses last half."

"I know it is," cried Tod, who had only wanted the lead, not choosing to take it himself. "Now then, Vale, make your defence if you can."

I daresay you recollect how hotly you used to take up a cause when you were at school yourselves, not waiting to know whether it might be right or wrong. Mrs. Frost said to us on one of these occasions she wondered whether we should ever be as eager to take up heaven. They pounced upon Vale with an awful row. He stood with his arm round one of the trees behind, looking scared to death. I glanced back for Sanker, expecting his confirming testimony, but could not see him, and at that moment Lacketer appeared again, peeping round the trees. Whitney called to him.

"Here, Lacketer. Was it Vale you suspected?"

"As much as I did anybody else," doggedly answered Lacketer.

It was taken as an affirmative. The boys believed the thief was found, and were mad against him. Vale spoke something, shaking

and trembling like the leaves in the wind, but his words were drowned. He was not brave, and they looked ready to tear him to pieces.

“ My half-crown, Vale,” roared Tod. “ Did you take it just now ? ”

Vale made no answer ; I thought he could not. His face frightened me : the lips were blue and drawn back, the teeth chattered.

“ Search his pockets.”

It was a simultaneous thought, for a dozen said it. Vale was turned out, and half a crown found upon him ; no other money. The boys yelled and groaned. Tod, with his great strength, pushed them aside, as the coin was flung to him.

“ Shall I resume possession of this half-crown ? ” he asked of Vale, holding it before him in defiant mockery.

“ If you like. I——”

Vale broke down with a gasp and a sob. His piteous aspect might have moved even Tod.

“ Look here,” said he, “ I don’t care in general to punish a coward ; I regard him as an abject animal beneath me : but I cannot go from my word. Ducking is too good for you, Vale, but you shall have it. Be off to that further tree yonder ; we’ll give you so much grace. Let him start fair, boys, and then hound him on. It will be a fine chase.”

Vale, seeming to be too confused and terror-stricken to do anything but obey, went to the tree, and then darted away *in the direction of the river*. It takes time to read all this; but scarcely a minute appeared to have passed since Tod first came out with Whitney, and spoke of the half-crown. Giving Vale the fair start, the boys sprang after him, like a pack of hounds in full cry. Tod, the swiftest runner in the school, was following, when he found himself seized by Sanker. I had stayed.

“Have you been accusing Vale? Are you going to duck him?”

“Well?” cried Tod, angry at being stopped.

“It was not Vale who took the things. Vale! He is as innocent as you are. You’ll kill him, Todhetley; he cannot bear terror.”

“Who says he is innocent?”

“I do. I say it on my honour. It was another fellow, whose name I’ve been suppressing. This is *your* work, Johnny Ludlow.”

I felt a sudden rush of repentance. A conviction that Sanker spoke nothing but the truth.

“You said it was Vale, Sanker.”

“I never did. *You* said it. I told you you’d better believe it was any other rather than Vale. And I meant it.”

But that Sanker was not a fellow to tell a lie, I should have thought he told one then.

The impression, resting on my memory, was that he acknowledged to its being Vale, if he had not exactly stated it.

“ You know you told me to be quiet, Sanker: you said, give him a chance.”

“ But I thought you were speaking of another then, not Vale. I swear it was not Vale. He is as honest as the day.”

Tod, looking ready to strike me, waiting for no more explanation, was already off, shouting to the crew to turn, far more anxious now to save Vale than he had been to duck him.

How he managed to arrest them, I never knew. He did do it. But for being the fleetest runner and strongest fellow, he could never have overtaken, passed, and flung himself back upon them, with his arms stretched out, his word of explanation on his lips.

The river was more than a mile away, taking the straight course over the fields, as a bird flies, and leaping fences and ditches. Vale went panting on, *for it*. It was as if his senses were scared. Tod flew after him, the rest following on more gently. The school-bell boomed out to call us in for evening study, but none heeded it.

“ Stop, Vale! Stop!” shouted Tod. “ It has been a mistake. Come back and hear about it. It was not you; it was another fellow. Come back, Harry; come back!”

The more Tod shouted, the faster Vale went

on. You should have seen the chase in the bright moonlight. It put us in mind of the fairy tales of Germany, where the phantom huntsman and his pack are seen coursing at midnight. Vale made for a part where the banks of the river are overshadowed by trees. Tod was only about thirty yards behind when he gained it; he saw him leap in, and heard the plunge.

But when he got close, there was no sign of Vale in the water. Had he suddenly sunk? Tod's breath and heart stood still with fear. The boys were coming up by ones and twos, and a great silence ensued. Tod stripped, ready to plunge in when Vale should rise.

"Here's his cap," whispered one, picking it up from the bank.

"He was a good swimmer; he must have been seized with the cramp."

"Look here; they say there are holes in the river, just above this bend. What if he has sunk into one?"

"Hold your row, all of you," cried Tod, in a hoarse whisper that betrayed his fear. "Who's to listen with that noise?"

He was listening for a sound, watching for the faintest ripple, that might give indication of Vale's rising. But none came. Tod stood there in his shirt till he shivered with cold. And the church clock struck seven, and then eight, and it was of no use waiting.

It was a horrible feeling. Somehow we seemed, I and Tod, to be responsible for Vale's death. I for having mistaken Sanker; Tod for entering upon the threatened ducking, and hounding the boys on.

The worst was to come: the going back to Dr. Frost and the masters with the tale; the breaking it to Mr and Mrs. Vale at Vale Farm. While Tod was dressing himself, the rest went on slowly, nobody staying by him but me and Sanker.

"It's *your* doings more than mine," Tod said, turning to Sanker in his awful distress. "If you knew who the thief was last half, you should have disclosed it; not have given him the opportunity to resume his game. Had you done so this could not have happened."

"I promised him then I should proclaim him if he did resume it; I have told him to-night I shall do it," quietly answered Sanker. "It was Lacketer."

"Lacketer!"

"Lacketer. And since my eyes were opened, it has seemed to me that all yours must have been closed, not to find him out. His manner was enough to betray him: only, I suppose—you wanted the clue."

"But, Sanker, why did you let me think it was Vale?" I asked.

"*You* made the first mistake; I let you lie under it for Lacketer's sake; to give him the

chance," said Sanker. "Who was to foresee you would go and tell it?"

It had never passed my lips, save those few words at the time when Tod questioned me. Harding was the one outside the porch who had overheard it; but he had kept it to himself until now, when he thought the time had come for speaking.

What was to be done?—oh, what was to be done? It seemed as if a great weight of darkness had suddenly fallen upon us, and could never again be lifted. We had a death upon our hands.

"There's just a chance," said Tod, dragging his legs along like so much lead, and beginning with a sort of groan. "Vale may have made for the land again as soon as he got in, and come out lower down. In that case he would run to his home probably."

Just a chance, as Tod said. But in the depth of despair chances are caught at. If we cut across to the left hand (the left, standing with our backs to the river), Vale Farm was not more than a mile off: and we turned to it. The absenting ourselves from school seemed as nothing. Tod went on with a bound now there was an object, a ray of hope; I and Sanker after him.

"I can't go in," said Tod, when we came in front of the farm, a long, low house, with lights gleaming in some of the windows. "It's

not cowardice ; at least, I don't think it is. It's——never mind ; I'll wait for you here."

"I say," said Sanker to me, "what excuse are we to make for going in at this time ? We can't tell the truth."

I could not. Harry Vale stood alone ; he had neither brother nor sister. I could not go in and tell his mother that he was dead. She was sitting in one of the front parlours, sewing by the lamp. We saw her through the window as we stole up to look in. But there was no time for plotting. Footsteps approached, and we did but get back on the path when Mr. Vale came up. He was a tall, fine man, with a fair face and blue eyes like his son's. What we said I hardly knew ; something about being close by, and thought we'd call on our way home. Sanker had been there several times in the holidays.

Mr. Vale took us in with a beaming face to his wife. They were the kindest-hearted people, liberal and hospitable, as most well-to-do farmers are. Mrs. Vale, rolling up her work, said we must take something to help us on our way home, and rang the bell. We never said we could not stop ; we never said Tod was waiting outside. But there were no signs that Vale had gone home half-drowned.

Two maids put the supper on the table, and Mrs. Vale helped them ; for Sanker had summoned courage to say it was late for us to

stop. About fifteen things. Cold ducks, and a ham, and collared-head, and a big dish of custard with nutmeg on the top, and fruit and cake. I couldn't have swallowed a morsel ; the lump rising in my throat would have hindered it. I don't think Sanker could, for he said resolutely we must not sit down because of Dr. Frost.

"How is Harry ?" asked Mrs. Vale.

"Oh, he is—very well," said Sanker, after waiting to see if I'd answer. "Have you seen him lately ?"

"Not since last Sunday week, when he and Master Snepp spent the day here. He was looking well, and seemed in spirits. It was rather a hazard, the sending him to school at all ; Mr. Vale wanted to have him taught at home, as he has been until this year. But I think it is turning out for the best."

"He gets frightened, does he not ?" said Sanker, who knew what she meant.

"He did," replied Mrs. Vale ; "but he is growing out of it. Never was a braver little child born than he ; but when he was four years old, he strolled away from his nurse into a field where a bull was at grass, a savage animal. What exactly happened, we never knew ; that Harry was chased across the field by it was certain, and then tossed. The chief injury was to the nerves, strange though that may seem for so young a child. For a long while afterwards,

the least alarm would put him into a state of terrible fear, almost a fit. But he is getting over it now."

She told this for my benefit; just as if she had divined the night's work; Sanker knew it before. I felt sick with remorse as I listened—and Tod had called him a coward! Let us get away.

"I wish you could stay, my lads," cried Mr. Vale; "it vexes me to turn you out supperless. What's this, Charlotte? Ah yes, to be sure! I wish you could put up the whole table for them."

For Mrs. Vale had been putting some tartlets into paper, and gave them to us, a packet for each. "Eat them as you go along," she said. "And give my love to Harry."

"And tell him that he must bring you both on Sunday, to spend the day," added Mr. Vale. "Perhaps young Mr. Todhetley will come also. You might get here to breakfast, and go with us to church. I'll write to Dr. Frost."

Outside at last; I and my shame. These good, nice, simple-hearted people—oh, had we indeed, between us, made them childless? "Young Mr. Todhetley," waiting amid the stubble in the outer field, came springing to the fence, his white face working in the bright light of the hunter's moon.

"What a long while you have been! Well?"

"Nothing," said Sanker, briefly. "No news!"

I don't think we've been much above five minutes."

What a walk home it was! Mr. Blair, the out-of-school master, came down upon us with his thunder, but Tod seemed never to hear him. The boys, hushed and quiet as nature is before an impending storm, had not dared to tell and provoke it. I could not see Lacketer.

"Where's Vale?" roared Mr. Blair, supposing he had been with us. "But that prayers are waiting, I'd cane all four of you. Where are you going, Todhetley?"

"Don't stop me, Mr. Blair," said Tod, putting him aside with a quiet authority and a pain in his voice that made Blair stare. We called Blair Baked Pie, because of his name, Pyefinch.

"Read the prayers without me, please Mr. Blair," went on Tod. "I must see Dr. Frost. If you don't know what has happened to-night, sir, ask the rest to tell you."

He went out to his interview with the Doctor. Tod was not one to shirk his duty. The seeing, Vale's father and mother he had shrunk from; but the confession to Dr. Frost he made himself. What passed between them we never knew: how much contrition Tod spoke, how much reproach the Doctor. Roger and Miles, the manservant and boy, were called into the library, and sent abroad: we thought it might be to search the banks of the river, or give notice for

it to be dragged. The next of us called in, was Sanker. The next, Lacketer.

But Lacketer did not answer the call. He had vanished. Mr. Blair went searching for him high and low, and could not find him. Lacketer had run away. He knew his time at Worcester House was over, and thought he'd save himself from dismissal. It was he who had been the thief, and whom Sanker suspected. As good mention here that Dr. Frost got a letter from his aunt the next Saturday, saying the school did not agree with her nephew, and she had withdrawn him from it.

Whether the others slept that night, I can't tell; I did not. Harry Vale's drowned form was in my mind all through it; and the sorrow of Mr. and Mrs. Vale. In the morning Tod got up, looking more like one dead than alive: he had one of his frightful headaches. I felt ready to die myself; it seemed that never another happy morning could dawn in the world.

"Shall I ask if I may bring you some breakfast up here, Tod? And it's just possible, you know, that Vale ——"

"Hold your peace, Johnny!" he snapped. "If ever you tell me a false thing of a fellow again, I'll thrash your life out of you."

He came downstairs when he was dressed, and went out, waiting neither for breakfast nor prayers. I went out to watch him away, knowing he must be going to Vale Farm.

Oh, I never shall forget it. As Tod passed round the corner by the railings, he ran against him. *Him*, Harry Vale.

My sight grew dim; I couldn't see; the field and the railings were reeling. But it only lasted for a moment or two. Tod's breath was coming in great gasps then from his heaving chest, and he had Vale's two hands grasped in his. I thought he was going to hug him: a loud sob broke from him like a cry.

"We have been thinking you were drowned!"

Vale smiled. "I am too good a swimmer for that."

"But you disappeared at once."

"I struck back out of the river the instant I got into it; I was afraid you'd come in after me; and crept around the alder trees lower down. When you were all gone I swam across in my clothes; see how they've shrunk!"

"Swam across! Have you not been home?"

"No, I went to my uncle's: it's nearer than home: and they made me go to bed, and dried my things, and sent to tell Dr. Frost. I did not say why I went into the water," added Vale, lifting his kind face. "But the Doctor came round the ferry late, and he knew all about it. They talked to me well, he and my uncle, about being frightened at nothing, and I've promised not to be so stupid again."

"God bless you, Vale!" cried Tod. "You know it was a mistake."

"Yes, Dr. Frost said so. The half-crown was my own. My uncle met us boys when we were out walking yesterday morning, and gave it me. I thought you might have seen him give it."

Tod linked his arm within Vale's and walked off to the breakfast-room. The wonder to me was how, with Vale's good honest face and open manners, we could have suspected him capable of theft. But when you once go in for a mistake it carries you on in spite of probabilities. The boys were silent for an instant when Vale went in, and then you'd have thought the roof was coming off with cheers. Tod stood looking from the window, and I vow I saw him rub his handkerchief across his eyes.

We went to Vale Farm on Sunday morning early: the four of us invited, and Harding. Mr. Vale shook hands twice with us all round so heartily, that we might see, I thought, they bore no malice; and Mrs. Vale's breakfast was a sight to do you good, with the jugs of cream and the home-made sausages.

After that, came church: it looked like a procession turning out for it. Mr. and Mrs. Vale, and the grandmother, an upright old lady with a China-crape shawl and white hair, us five, and a man and maid servant. The river lay on the right, the church was in front of us; people dotted the fields on their way to it, and the bells were ringing as they do at a wedding.

"This is a different sort of Sunday from what we thought last Thursday it would be," I said in Tod's ear when we were together for a minute at the gate.

"Johnny, if I were older, and went in for that kind of thing, as perhaps I shall do sometime, I should like to put up a public thanksgiving in church to-day."

"A public thanksgiving?"

"For mercies received."

I stared at Tod. He did not seem to heed it, but took his hat off and walked with it in his hand all across the churchyard.

XI.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

PERHAPS this might be called the beginning of the end of the chain of events that I alluded to in that other paper. An end that terminated in distress, and death, and sorrow.

It was the half year following that hunt of ours by moonlight. Summer weather had come in, and we were looking forward to the holidays, hoping the heat would last.

The half-mile field, called so from its length, on Vale Farm was being mowed. Sunday intervened, and the grass was left to dry until the Monday. The haymakers had begun to put it into cocks. The river stretched past along the field on one side ; a wooden fence bounded it on the other. It was out of all proportion, that field, so long and so narrow.

Tod and I and Sanker and Harry Vale were spending the Sunday at the Farm. Since that hunt last autumn Mr. and Mrs. Vale often invited us. There was no evening service, and we went into the hay-field, and began throwing the hay at one another. It was rare fun ; they might nearly have heard our shouts at Worcester

House ; and I don't believe but that every one of us forgot it was Sunday.

What with the sultry weather and the hay, some of us got into a tolerable heat. The river wore a tempting look ; and Tod and Sanker, without so much as a thought, undressed themselves behind the trees, and plunged in. It was twilight then ; the air had begun to wear its weird silence ; the shadows were putting on their ghastliness ; the moon, well up, sailed along under white clouds.

I and Vale were walking slowly back towards the Farm, when a great cry broke over the water,—a cry as of something in pain ; but whether from anything more than a night-bird, was uncertain. Vale stopped and turned his head.

A second cry : louder, longer, more distinct, and full of agony. It came from one of those two in the water. Vale flew back with his fleet foot—fleeter than any fellow's in the school, except Tod's and Snepp's. As I followed, a startling recollection came over me, and I wondered how it was that all of us had been so senseless as to forget it : that one particular spot on the river was known to be dangerous.

“Bear up ; I'm coming,” shouted Vale.
“Don't lose your heads.”

A foot-passenger, walking on the other side the fence, saw something was wrong : if he did not hear Vale's words, he heard the cry. He

came cutting across the field, scattering the hay with his feet. And then I saw it was Baked Pie : which meant our mathematical master, Mr. Blair. They had given him at baptism the name of " Pyefinch," after some old uncle who had money to leave ; no second name, nothing but that : and the school had converted him into " Baked Pie." But I don't think fathers and mothers have any right to put odd names upon helpless babies and send them out to be a laughing-stock to the world.

Blair was not a bad fellow, putting his name aside, and had gone in for honours at Cambridge. We got to the place together.

" What is amiss, Ludlow ? "

" I don't know, sir. Todhetley and Sanker are in the water ; and we've heard cries."

" In the water to-night ! And *there*."

Vale, already in the middle of the river, was swimming back, holding up Sanker. But Tod was nowhere to be seen. Mr. Blair looked up and down ; and an awful fear came over me. The current led down to Mr. Charles Vale's mill—Vale's uncle. More than one man had found his death there.

" Oh, sir ! Mr. Blair ! where is he ? What has become of him ? "

" Hush ! " breathed Blair. He was sliding off some of his things quietly, his eyes fixed on a particular part of the river. In he went, striking out for it without more splash than

he could help, and reached it just as Tod's head appeared above the water. *The third time of rising.* I did not go in for such a girl's trick as to faint ; but I never afterwards could trace the minutes as they had passed by until Tod was lying on the grass under the trees. *That* I remember always. The scene is before my eyes now as plainly as it was then, though more time has gone by since than perhaps you'd think for : the treacherous river flowing on calmly, the quivering leaves overhead, through which the moon was glittering, and Tod lying there white and motionless. Mr. Blair had saved his life ; there could be no question of that, saved it only by a minute of time ; and I thought to myself I'd never call him Baked Pie again.

“Instead of standing moonstruck, Ludlow, suppose you make a run to the Farm and see what help you can get,” spoke Mr. Blair. “Todhetley must be carried there, and put between hot blankets.”

Help was got. Sanker walked to the Farm, Tod was carried ; and a regular bustle set in when they arrived there. Both of them were put to bed : Tod had come-to then. Mrs. Vale and the servants ran up and down like wild Indians ; and the good old lady with the white hair insisted upon sitting up by Tod's bed-side all night.

“No, mother,” said Mr. Vale, “some of us will do that.”

"My son, I tell you that I shall watch by him myself," returned the old lady; and as they deferred to her always, she did.

When the explanation of the accident was given—as much of it as ever could be given—it sounded rather strange. *Both* of them had been taken with cramp, and the river was not in fault, after all. Tod said that he had been in the water two or three minutes, when he was seized with what he supposed to be cramp in the legs, though he never had it before. He was turning to strike out for the bank, when he found himself caught hold of by Sanker. They loosed each other in a minute, but Tod's legs were helpless, and he sank.

Sanker's story was very much the same. He was seized with cramp, and in his fear caught hold of Tod for protection. Tod was an excellent swimmer, Sanker a poor one; but while Sanker's cramp got better, or at least no worse, Tod's disabled him. Most likely, as we decided when we heard this, Sanker, who never went below at all, would have got out of the water without help; Tod would have been drowned but for Blair. He had sunk twice when the good rescue came. Mr. Featherston, the man of pills who attended the school, said it was all through their having jumped into the water when they were in a white heat; the cold had struck to them. While Mrs. Hall, with her

grave face, thought it was through their having gone bathing on a Sunday.

Whatever it was through, Old Frost made a commotion. He was not severe in general, but he raised enough noise over this. What with one thing and another, the school, he declared, was being perpetually upset.

Tod and Sanker came back from Mr. Vale's on the next day ; Monday. The Doctor ordered them into his study, and sat there with his cane in his hand while he talked, rapping the table with it now and again as fiercely as if it had been their backs. And the backs would surely have got it but for having just escaped coffins.

All this would not have been much, but it was to lead to a great deal more. To quite a chain of events, as I have said ; and to trouble and sorrow in the far-off end. Hannah, at home, was fond of repeating to Lena what she called the sayings of Poor Richard, "For want of a nail the shoe was lost ; for want of a shoe the horse was lost ; for want of a horse the rider was lost ; and all for the want of a little care about a horse-shoe nail." The horse-shoe nail and the man's loss seemed a great deal nearer each other than that Sunday night's accident, and what was eventually to come of it. A little insignificant mustard-seed, dropped into the ground, shoots forth and becomes in the end a great spreading tree.

On the Wednesday, who should come over

but the Squire, clasping Pyefinch Blair's hand in his, and saying with tears in his good old eyes that he had saved his son's life. Old Frost, you see, had written the news to Dyke Manor. Tod, strong and healthy in constitution, was all right again, not a hair on his head the worse for it; but Sanker had not escaped so well.

As early as the Monday night, the first night of his returning home from Vale Farm, it began to come on; and the next morning the boys, sleeping in the same room, told a tale of Sanker's having been delirious. He had sat up in bed and woke them all up with his cries, thinking he was trying to swim out of deep water, and could not. Next he said he wanted some water to drink; they gave him one draught after another till the big water-jug was emptied, but his thirst kept on saying "More! more!" Sanker did not seem to remember anything of this. He came down with the rest in the morning, his face very white, except for a pinkish spot in the middle of his cheeks, and he thought the fellows must be chaffing him. The fellows told him they were not; and one, it was Bill Whitney, said they would not think of chaffing him just after his having been so nearly drowned.

It went on to the afternoon. Sanker ate no dinner, for I looked to see; he was but one amidst the many, and it was not noticed by the

masters. And if it had been, they'd have thought that the ducking had taken away his appetite. The drawing-master, Wilson, followed suit with Hall, and said he was not surprised at their being nearly drowned, after making hay on the Sunday. But, about four o'clock, when the first-class were before Dr. Frost with their Greek books, Sanker suddenly let his fall. Instead of stooping for it, his eyes took a far-off look, as if they were seeking for it round the walls of the room.

“Lay hold of him,” said Dr. Frost.

He did not faint, but seemed dull : it looked as much like a lazy fit as anything ; and he was sensible. They put him to sit on one of the benches, and then he began to tremble.

“He must be got to bed,” said the doctor. “Mr Blair, kindly see Mrs. Hall, will you. Tell her to warm it. Stay. Wait a moment.”

Dr. Frost followed Mr. Blair from the hall. It was to say that Sanker had better go at once to the blue-room. If the bed there was not aired, or otherwise ready, Sanker's own bedding could be taken to it. “I'll give Mrs. Hall the orders myself,” said the Doctor.

The blue-room—called so from its blue-stained walls—was the one used on emergencies. When we found Sanker had been taken there, we made up our minds that he was going to have an illness. Featherston came and thought the same.

The next day, Wednesday, he was in a kind of fever, rambling in his speech every other minute. The Squire said he should like to see him, and Blair took him upstairs. Sanker lay with the same pink hue on his cheeks, only deeper ; and his eyes were bright and glistening. Hall, who was addicted to putting in her word on all occasions when it could tell against us boys, said if he had stayed two or three days in the bed at Vale Farm, where he was first put, he'd have had nothing of this. Perhaps Hall was right. It had been Sanker's own doings to get up. When Mrs. Vale saw him coming down-stairs, she wanted to send him back to bed again, but he told her he was quite well, and came off to school.

Sanker knew the Squire, and put out his hand. The Squire took it, not saying a word. He told us later that to him Sanker's face looked to have death in it. When he would have spoken, Sanker's eyes had grown wild again, and he was talking nonsense about his class-books.

“ Johnny, boy, you sit in his room a bit at times ; you are patient and not rough,” said the Squire, when he went out to his carriage, for he had driven over. “ I have asked them to let you be up there as much as they can. The poor boy is very ill, and has no relatives near him.”

Dwarf Giles, touching his hat to Tod and me,

was at the horses' heads, Bob and Blister. The cattle knew us : I'm sure of it. They had had several hours' rest in Old Frost's stables while the Squire went on foot about the neighbourhood to call on people. Dr. Frost, standing out with us, admired the fine dark horses greatly ; at which Giles was prouder than if the Doctor had admired *him*. He cared for nothing in the world so much as those two animals, and groomed them with a will.

" You'll take care that he wants for nothing, Doctor," I heard the Squire say as he shook hands. " Don't spare any care and expense to get him well ; I wish to look upon this illness as my charge. It seems something like an injustice, you see, that my boy should come off without damage, and this poor fellow be lying there."

He took the reins and stepped up to his seat, Giles getting in beside him. As we watched the horses step off with the high spring that the Squire loved, he looked back and nodded to us. And it struck me that, in this care for Sanker, the Pater was trying to make some recompense for the suspicion cast on him a year before at Dyke Manor.

It was a sharp, short illness, the fever raging, but not infectious ; I had never been with anybody in such a one before, and I did not wish to be again. To hear how Sanker's mind rambled, was marvellous ; but some of us shivered when it came to ravings. Very often he'd be making

hay ; fighting against numbers that were throwing cocks at him, while he could not throw back upon them. Then he'd be in the water, buffeting with high sea-waves, and shrieking out that he was drowning, and throwing his thin hot arms aloft in agony. Sometimes the trouble would be his lessons, hammering at Latin derivations and Greek roots ; and next he was toiling through a problem in Euclid. One night when he was at the worst, Old Featherston lost his head, and the next day Mr. Carden came posting from Worcester in his carriage. I wonder if he remembers it ?*

There were medical men of repute nearer ; but somehow in extremity we all turn to him. And his skill did not fail here. Whether it might be any particular relief he was enabled to give, or that the disease had reached its crisis, I cannot tell, but from the moment Mr. Carden stood at his bed-side, Sanker began to mend. Featherston said the next day that the worst of the danger had passed. It seemed to us that it had just set in ; no rat was ever so weak as Sanker.

The holidays came then, and the boys went home : all but me. Sanker couldn't lift a hand, but he could smile at us and understand, and he said he'd like to have me stay a bit with him ; so they sent word from home I might.

* Since these papers were written, Henry Carden has, alas ! died.—ED.

Mr. Blair stayed also ; Dr. Frost wished it. The Doctor was subpoenaed to give evidence on a trial at Westminster, and had to hasten up to London. Blair had no relatives at all, and did not care to go anywhere. He told me in confidence that his staying saved his pocket. Blair was strict in school, but over Sanker's bed he got as friendly with me as possible. I liked him ; he was always gentlemanly ; and I grew to dislike their calling him Baked Pie as much as he disliked it.

" You go out and get some air, Ludlow," he said to me the day after the school broke up, " or we may have you ill next."

Upon that I demanded what I wanted with air. I had taken precious long walks with the fellows up to the day before yesterday.

" You go," said he, curtly.

" Go, Johnny," said Sanker, in his poor weak voice, which couldn't raise itself above a whisper. " I'm getting well, you know."

My way of taking the air was to sit down at the school-room desk and write to Tod. In about five minutes somebody walked round the house as if looking for an entrance, and then stopped at the side-door. Putting my head out at the window, I took a view of her. It was a young lady in a plain grey dress and straw bonnet, with a cloak over her arm, and an umbrella put up against the sun. The back regions were turned inside out, for they

had begun the summer cleaning that morning, and the cook came stalking along in pattens to answer the knock.

“ This is Dr. Frost’s, I believe. Can I see him ? ”

It was a sweet, calm, gentle voice. The cook, who had no notion of visitors coming at the cleaning season, when the boys were just got rid of, and the Doctor had gone, stared at her for a moment, and then asked in her surly way whether she had business with Dr. Frost. That cook and Molly at home might have run in a curricle, they were such a match for temper.

“ Business !—oh, certainly. I must see him, if you please.”

The cook kicked off her pattens, and went up the back stairs, leaving the young lady outside. As it was business, she supposed she must call Mr. Blair.

“ Somebody wants Dr. Frost,” was the announcement she made to him. “ A girl at the side door.”

Which of course caused Blair to suppose it might be a child from one of the cottages come to ask for help of some sort ; as they did come sometimes. He thought Hall might have been called to her, but he went down at once ; without his coat, and his sick-room slippers on. Naturally, when he saw the young lady, it took him aback.

“ I beg your pardon, sir ; I hope you will not deem me an intruder. I have just got here.”

Blair stared nearly as much as the cook. The face was so pleasant, the voice so refined, that he inwardly called himself a fool for showing himself to her in that trim. For once, his speech failed him ; a thing Blair’s had never done at mathematics, I can tell you ; he had not the smallest notion who she was or what she wanted. And it seemed that the silence frightened her.

“ Am I too late ? ” she asked, her face growing white. “ Has the—the worst happened ? ”

“ Happened to what ? ” questioned Blair, for he never once thought of the sick fellow above, and was all at sea. “ Pardon me, young lady, but I do not know what it is you are speaking of.”

“ Of my brother, Edward Sanker. Oh, sir ! is he dead ? ”

“ Miss Sanker ! Truly I beg your pardon for my stupidity. He is out of danger ; he is getting well.”

She sat down for a minute on the old stone bench beyond the door, rough with the crowd of boys’ names cut in it. Her lips were shaking just a little, and the soft brown eyes had tears in them ; but the face was breaking into a glad smile.

"Oh, Dr. Frost, thank you, thank you ! Somehow, I never thought of him as dead until this minute, and it startled me."

Fancy her taking him for Frost ! Blair was a good-looking fellow under thirty, slender, and well made. The Doctor stood out an old guy of fifty, with a stern face and black knee-breeches.

"My mother had your letter, sir, but she was not able to come. My father is very ill, needing her attention every moment ; she strove to see on which side her duty lay—to stay with him, or to come to Edward ; and she thought it must lie in remaining with papa. So she sent me. I left Wales last night."

"Is Mr. Sanker's a fever, too ?" asked Blair, in wonder.

"No, an accident. He was hurt in the mine."

It was odd that it should be so ; the two illnesses occurring at the same time ! Mr. Sanker, it appeared, fell from the shaft ; his leg was broken, and there were other hurts. At first they were afraid for him.

Blair was struck into a dilemma. He'd not have minded Mrs. Sanker ; but he did not know much about young ladies, not being accustomed to them. She got up from the bench.

"Mamma bade me say to you, Dr. Frost——"

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Blair again. "I am not Dr. Frost; the Doctor went to London this morning. My name is Blair—one of the masters. Will you walk in?"

He shut her into the parlour on his way to call Hall, and to put on his boots and coat. Seeing me, he turned into the school-room.

"Ludlow, are not the Sankers connections of yours?"

"Not of mine. Of Mrs. Todhetley's."

"It's all the same. You go in and talk to her. I don't know what on earth to do. She is come to be with Sanker, but she'll not like to stay here with only you and me. If the Doctor were at home it would be different."

"She seems an uncommon nice girl, Mr. Blair."

"Good gracious!" went on Blair in his dilemma. "The Doctor told me he had written to Wales some days ago; but he supposed Mrs. Sanker could not make it convenient to come; and yesterday he wrote again, saying there was no necessity for it, as Sanker was out of danger. I don't know what on earth to do with her," repeated Mr. Blair, who had a habit of getting hopelessly bewildered on occasions. "Hall! Where's Mrs. Hall?"

As he went along the flagged passage calling out, a boy came whistling to the door, carrying a big carpet-bag: Miss Sanker's luggage. The coach which she had had to take, on

leaving the rail, put her down half a mile off, and she walked up in the sun, leaving her bag to be brought.

It seemed that we were going in for mistakes. When I went to her, and began to say who I was, she mistook me for Tod. It made me laugh.

“Tod is a great, strong fellow, as tall as Mr. Blair, Miss Sanker. I am only Johnny Ludlow.”

“Edward has told me all about you both,” she said, taking my hands, and looking into my face with her nice eyes. “Tod’s proud and overbearing, though generous; but you have ever been pleasant with him. I am afraid I shall begin to call you ‘Johnny’ at once.”

“Nobody ever calls me anything else; except the masters here.”

“You must have heard of me—Mary?”

“But you are not Mary?”

“Yes, I am.”

That she was telling truth any fellow might see, and yet at first I hardly believed her. Sanker had told us his sister Mary was beautiful as an angel. *Her* face had no beauty in it, so to say; it was only kind, and nice, and loving. People called Mrs. Parrifer a beautiful woman; perhaps I had taken my notions of beauty from her; she had a Roman nose, and great big eyes that rolled about, and a gruff voice, and a lovely peach-and-white complexion (but people

said it was paint), and looked three parts a fool. Mary Sanker was just the opposite to all this, and her cheeks were dimpled. But still she had not what people call beauty.

“ May I go up and see Edward ? ”

“ I should think so ; Mr. Blair, I suppose, will be back directly. He is looking very bad : you will not be frightened at him ? ”

“ After picturing him in my mind as dead, he will not frighten me, however ill he may look.”

“ I should say the young lady had better take off her bonnet afore going in. Young Mr. Sanker haven’t seen bonnets of late, and might be scared.”

The interruption came from Hall ; we turned, and saw her standing there. She spoke in a resentful tone, as if Miss Sanker had offended her ; and no doubt she had, by coming when the house was not in company order, and had nothing better to send in for dinner but cold mutton and the half of a rhubarb pie. Hall would have to get the mutton hashed now, which she’d never have done for me and Blair.

“ Yes, if you please ; I should much like to take my bonnet off,” said Miss Sanker, going to Hall, with a smile. “ I think you must be Mrs. Hall. My brother has talked of you.”

Hall took her to a room, and presently she came forth all fresh and nice, the travelling dust gone, and her bright brown hair smooth and shining. Her grey dress was soft, one that

would not disturb a sick-room ; it had a bit of white lace round the throat and at the wrists, and a little pearl brooch in front. She was twenty-one last birthday, but she did not look as much.

Blair had been in to prepare Sanker, and his great eyes (only great since his illness) were staring out for her with a wild expectation. You never saw brother and sister less alike ; the one so nice, the other ugly enough to frighten the crows. Sanker had got my hand clasped tight in his, when she stooped to kiss him. I don't think he knew of it ; but I could not get away. In that minute I saw how fond they were of each other.

“ Could not the mother come, Mary ? ”

“ No, papa is—is not well,” she said, for of course she would not tell him yet of any accident. “ Papa wanted her there, and you wanted her here ; she thought her duty lay at home, and she was not afraid but that God would raise up friends to take care of you.”

“ What is the matter with him ? ”

“ Some complicated illness or other,” Mary Sanker answered, in a careless tone. “ He was a little better when I came away. You have been very ill, Edward.”

He held up his wasted hand as proof, with a half smile ; but it fell again.

“ I don't believe I should have pulled through it at all, Mary, but for Blair.”

"That's the gentleman I saw. The one without a coat. Has he nursed you?"

Sanker made a motion with his white lips. "Right well, too. He, and Hall, and Johnny here. Old Hall is as good as gold when any of us are ill."

"And pays herself out by being tarter than ever when we are well," I could not help saying: for it was the truth.

"Blair saved Todhetley's life," Sanker went on. "We used to call him Baked Pie before, and give him all the trouble we could."

"Ought you to talk, Edward?"

"It is your coming that seems to give me strength for it," he answered. "I did not know that Frost had written home."

"There was a delay in the letters, or I might have been here three days ago," said Miss Sanker, speaking in a penitent tone, as if she were in the habit of taking other people's faults upon herself. "While papa is not well, the clerk down at the mine opens the business letters. Seeing one directed to papa privately, he neither spoke of it nor sent it up, and for three days it lay unopened."

Sanker had gone off into one of his weak fits before she finished speaking: lying with his eyes and mouth wide open, between sleep and wake. Hall came in, and said, with a tone that snapped Miss Sanker up, *it wouldn't do*: if people could not be there without talk-

ing, they must not be there at all. I don't say but what she was a capable nurse, or that when a fellow was downright ill, she spared the wine in the arrowroot, and the sugar in the tea. Mary Sanker sat down by the bed-side, her fingers on her lips to show that she meant to keep silent.

We had visitors later. Mrs. Vale came over, as she did most days, to see how Sanker was getting on ; and Bill Whitney brought his mother. Mrs. Vale told Mary Sanker that she had better sleep at the Farm, as the Doctor was away ; she'd give her a nice room and make her comfortable. Upon that, Lady Whitney offered a spacious bed and dressing-room at the Hall. Mary thanked them both, saying how kind they were to be so friendly with a stranger ; but thought she must go to the Farm, as it would be within a walk night and morning. Bill spoke up, and said the carriage could fetch and bring her ; but Vale Farm was fixed upon ; and when night came, I went with her to show her the way.

" That's the water they went into, Miss Sanker ; and that's the very spot, behind the trees." She shivered just a little as she looked, but did not say much. Mrs. Vale met us at the door, and the old lady kissed Mary and told her she was a good girl to come fearlessly all the way alone from Wales to nurse her sick brother. When Mary came back the next

morning, she said they had given her such a beautiful room, the dimity window and bed curtains whiter than snow, and the sheets sweet with lavender.

Her going out to sleep appeased Hall ;— that, or something else. She was gracious all day, and sent us in two chickens for dinner. Mr. Blair cut them up and helped us. He had written to tell Dr. Frost in London of Miss Sanker's arrival, and while we were at table a telegram came back, saying Mrs. Hall was to take care of Miss Sanker, and make her comfortable.

It went on so for three or four days ; Mary sleeping at the Farm, and coming home in the morning. Sanker got well enough to be taken to a sofa in the pretty room that poor Mrs. Frost sat in nearly to the last ; and we were all four growing very jolly, as intimate as if we'd known each other as infants. I had taken to call her Mary, hearing Sanker do it so often ; and twice the name slipped accidentally out of Mr. Blair. The news from Wales was better and better. For visitors we had Mrs. Vale, Lady Whitney and Bill, and old Featherston. Some of them came every day. Dr. Frost was detained in London. The trial did not come on so soon as it was put down for ; when it did, it lasted a week, and the witnesses had to stay. He had written to Mary, telling her to make herself quite happy,

for she was in good hands. He also wrote to Mrs. Vale, and to Hall.

Well, it was either the fourth or fifth day. I know it was on Monday; and at five o'clock we were having tea for the first time in Sanker's sitting-room, the table drawn near the sofa, and Mary pouring it out. It was the hottest of hot weather, the window was up as high as it would go, but not a breath of air came in at it. Therefore, to see Blair begin to shake as if he were taken with an ague fit, was something inexplicable. His face looked grey, his ears and hands had turned a kind of bluish white.

"Halloo!" said Sanker, who was the first to see him. "What's the matter, sir?"

Blair got up, and sat down again, his limbs shaking, his teeth chattering. Mary Sanker hastily put some of the hot tea into a saucer, and held it to his lips. His teeth rattled against the china; I thought they'd bite a piece out of it; and in trying to take the saucer from Miss Sanker to hold it himself, the tea was shaken over on the carpet.

"Just you call Mrs. Hall, Johnny," said Sanker, who had propped himself up on his elbow to stare.

Hall came, and Mr. Featherston came; but they could not make anything out of it except that Blair had had a shaking-fit. He was soon all right again (except for a burning heat);

but the surgeon, given naturally to croak (or he'd not have got so frightened about Sanker when Mr. Carden was telegraphed for), said he hoped the mathematical master had not set in for fever.

He had set in for something. That was clear. The shaking-fits took him now and again, giving place to spells of low fever. Featherston was not sure whether it had a "typhoid character," he said; but the suspicion was quite enough, and our visitors fell off. Mrs. Vale was the only one who came; she laughed at supposing she could be afraid of it. So there we were still, we four; prisoners, as may be said; with some fever amid us that perhaps might have a typhoid character. Mr. Featherston said (or Hall, I forget which) that it must have been smouldering within him ever since the Sunday night when he jumped into the river. And Blair thought so himself.

Do not imagine he was ill as Sanker had been. Nothing of the kind. He got up every morning, and was in Mrs. Frost's sitting-room with us till evening: but he grew nearly the rat Sanker was for weakness, and wanted pretty nigh as much waiting on. Sometimes his hands were like a burning fire-coal; sometimes so cold that Mary would take them in hers to try and rub into their veins a little life. She was the gentlest nurse possible, and did not seem to think anything more of waiting on him

than on her brother. Mrs. Hall would stand by and say there was nothing left for her to do.

One day Lady Whitney came over, braving the typhoid character, and asked to see Miss Sanker in the great drawing-room ; where she stood sniffing at a bottle of aromatic vinegar.

“ My dear,” she said, when Mary went to her, “ I do not think this is at all a desirable position that you are placed in. I should not exactly like it for one of my own daughters. Mr. Blair is a very gentlemanly man, and all that, with quite proper feelings no doubt ; but sitting with him in sickness is altogether different from sitting with your brother. Featherston tells me there’s little or no danger of infection, and I have come to take you back to the Hall with me.”

But Mary would not go. It was not the position she should have voluntarily chosen, but circumstances had led her into it, and she thought her duty lay in staying where she was at present, was the substance of her answer. Mr. Blair had nursed her brother through his dangerous illness, and it would be cruelly ungrateful to leave him, now that he was ill himself. It seemed a duty thrown expressly in her way, she added ; and her mother approved of what she was doing.

So Lady Whitney went away (leaving the bottle of aromatic vinegar as a present for the sick-room) three parts convinced. Any way,

she said to them when she got home, that Mary Sanker was a sweet, good girl, trustworthy to her fingers' ends.

I'm sure she was like sunshine in the room, and read to us out of the Bible just as Harry Vale's fine old grandmother might have done. The first day that Sanker took a drive in a fly, he was tired afterwards, and went to bed and to sleep at tea-time. Towards sunset, before I walked with her to the Farm, Mary got the Book as usual ; and then hesitated, as if in doubt whether to presume to read or not, Sanker being away.

" Oh yes ; yes, if you please," said Mr. Blair.

She began the tenth chapter of St. John. It is a passably long one, as everybody knows ; and when she laid the Book down again, Blair had his eyes shut and his head resting on the back of the easy chair where he generally sat. His face never looked stiller or whiter. I glanced at Mary and she at me ; we thought he was worse, and she went up to him.

" I ought not to have read so long a chapter," she gently said. " I fear you are feeling worse."

" No ; I was only thinking. Thinking what an angel you are," he added in a low, impassioned, and yet reverent tone, as he bent forward to look up in her face, and took both her hands to hold for a moment in his.

She drew them away at once, saying, as she

passed me, that she was going to put her bonnet on, and should be ready in a minute. Of course it might have been the reflection of the red sun-clouds, but I never saw any face so glowing in all my life.

The next move old Featherston made, was to decide that the fever had *not* a typhoid character ; and visitors came about us again. It was something like the opening of a public-house after a tide of closing : all the Whitneys flocked in together, except Sir John, who was in town for Parliament. Mrs. Hall was uncommonly short with everybody. She had said from the first there was nothing infectious in the fever, told Featherston so to his face, and resented people's having stayed away. I wrote home to tell them there. On the Saturday Dr. Frost arrived, and we were glad to see him. Blair was getting rather better then.

“ Well, that Sunday night's plunge in the water has taken out its revenge ! ” remarked Dr. Frost. “ It only wants Todhetley and Vale to follow suit.”

But neither of them had the least intention of following. On the Monday Tod arrived to surprise us, strong as ever. The Squire had trusted him to drive the horses : you should have seen them spanking in at the gate of Worcester House, pawing the gravel, as Tod in the high carriage, the ribbons in his hands, and the groom beside him, brought them up

beautifully to the door. Some people called Tod ugly, saying his features were strong ; but I know he promised to be the finest man in our two counties.

He conveyed an invitation for the sick and the well. When the two invalids were able to get to Dyke Manor, Mr. and Mrs. Todhetley expected to see them, for change of air. Mary Sanker and I were to go as soon as we liked. Which we did in a few days, and were followed by Sanker and Mr. Blair ; both able to help themselves then, and getting well all one way.

It did not surprise people very much to hear that the mathematical master and Mary Sanker had fallen in love with one another. He (as Bill Whitney's mother had put in) was gentlemanly ; a good-looking fellow to boot : and you have heard what *she* was. The next week but one after arriving at Dyke Manor, Blair took Mrs. Todhetley into his confidence, though he had said nothing to Mary. They would be sure to marry in the end, she privately told the Squire, for the likeness in their faces to each other struck her at first sight.

“ Mary will not have a shilling, Mr. Blair ; she will go to her husband (whenever she shall marry) with even a very poor outfit,” Mrs. Todhetley explained, wishing Blair fully to understand things. “ Her father, Philip Sanker, was a gentleman bred and born, but his patrimony was small. He was persuaded to embark

it in a Welsh mine, and lost all. Report said some roguery was at work, but I don't know that it was. It ended in his becoming the overlooker on the very same mine, at a salary so small that they could hardly have reared their family anywhere but in Wales. Mary does not play, or draw, you see ; she has no accomplishments."

" She has what is a great deal better ; she does not want them," answered Blair, his pale face lighting up.

" In point of fact, the Sankers—as I fancy—have sacrificed the girls' interests to the boys ; they of course must have a thorough education," remarked Mrs. Todhetley. " They are good people, both ; you could not fail to like them. I sometimes think, Mr. Blair, that the children of these refined men and women (and Philip Sanker and his wife are that), compelled to live closely and to look at every sixpence before it is spent, turn out all the better for it."

" I am sure they do," answered Blair, earnestly. " It was my own case."

Taking Mrs. Todhetley into confidence meant as to his means as well as his love. He had saved a little money during the eight years he had been at work for himself—about two hundred pounds. It might be possible, he thought, to take to a school with this, and set up a tent at once : he and Mary. Mrs. Todhetley shook her head ; she could make as much of small

sums as anybody, but fancied this would be scarcely enough for what he wished.

“There would be the furniture,” she ventured to say with some hesitation, not liking to damp him.

“I think that is often included in the purchase-money for the good-will,” said Blair.

He had been acting on this notion before speaking to Mrs. Todhetley, and a friend of his in London, the Rev. Mr. Lockett, was already looking out for any schools that might be in the market. In a few days news came down of one to be disposed of in the neighbourhood of London. Mr. Lockett thought it was as desirable an investment as Blair was likely to find, he wrote word : only, the purchase-money, inclusive of furniture, was four hundred pounds instead of two.

“It is of no use to think of it,” said Mr. Blair, pushing his curly hair (they used to say he was vain of it at Frost’s) off his perplexed brow. “My two hundred pounds will not go far towards that.”

“It seems to me that the first step will be to go up and see the place,” remarked Mrs. Todhetley. “If what Mr. Lockett says of the school be true ; that is, if the people who have the disposal of it are not deceiving him ; it must be a very good thing.”

“I suppose you mean that the half of the purchase-money should remain on it as a mort-

gage, to be paid off later," cried Blair, seizing on the idea and brightening up.

"No; not exactly," said Mrs. Todhetley, getting as red as a rose, for she did not like to tell him what she did mean; it looked rather like a conspiracy.

"Look here, Blair," cried the Squire, laying hold of him in the garden by the button-hole, "I will see about the other two hundred. You go up, and make enquiries on the spot; and perhaps I'll go too; I should like a run; and if the affair is worth your while, we'll pay the money down on the nail, and so have done with it."

It was Blair's turn to get red now. "Do you mean, sir, that you—that you—would advance the half of the money? But it would be too generous. I have no claim on you——"

"No claim on me!" burst forth the Squire, pinning him against the wall of the pigeon-house in a passion. "No claim on me! When you saved my son from drowning but a few weeks ago! And got an ague-fever through it! No claim on me! What next will you say?"

"But that was nothing, sir. Any man, with the commonest feelings of humanity, would jump into the water if he saw a fellow-creature sinking."

"Commonest fiddlestick!" roared the Squire. "If this school is one likely to answer your purpose, you put down your two hundred

pounds, and I will see to the rest. There ! We'll go up to day."

"Oh, sir, I never expected this. Perhaps in a year or two I shall be able to pay the money back : but the goodness I never can repay."

"Don't you trouble your head about paying me back till you're asked to do it," retorted the Squire, mortally offended at the notion. "If you are too proud to take it and say nothing about it, I'll give it to Mary Sanker instead of you. I will, too. Mind, sir ! that half shall be your wife's, not yours."

If you'll believe me, there were tears in old Blair's eyes. He was but soft at times. The Squire gave him another thrust, which nearly sent Blair into the pigeon-house, and then walked off with his head up and his nankeen coat-skirts held out behind, to watch Drew give the green-meat to the pigs. Blair got over his push, and went to find Miss Mary, his thin cheeks alight with a spot as red as Sanker's had worn when his illness was coming on.

They went up to London that day. The Squire had plenty of sense when he chose to bring it out ; and instead of trusting to his own investigation and Blair's (which would have been the likeliest thing for him to do in general) he took a lawyer to the spot.

It proved to be all right. The gentleman giving up the school had made some money at it, and was going abroad to his friends, who had

settled in Queensland. Any efficient man, he said to the Squire, able to *keep* the pupils when once he had secured them, could not fail to do well at it. The clergyman, Mr. Lockett, had called on one or two of the parents, who confirmed what was asserted. Altogether it was a straightforward, fair thing ; but they'd not bate a shilling of the four hundred pounds.

The Squire concluded the bargain on the spot, for other applicants were after it, and there was danger in delay. He came back to Dyke Manor ; and the next thing he did was to accompany Mary Sanker home, and tell the news there.

Mr. Blair stayed in London to take possession, and get things in order. He had but time for a few days' flying visit to Mr. and Mrs. Sanker in Wales before opening his new school. There was no opposition there : people are apt to judge of prospects according to their own circumstances ; and they seemed to think it a good offer for Mary.

There was no opposition anywhere. Dr. Frost got a new mathematical master without trouble, and sent Blair his best wishes and a full set of plated spoons and forks and things, engraved with the initials P. M. B. He was wise enough to lay out the sum he wished to give in useful things, instead of a silver tea-pot or any other grand article of that kind, which would not be brought to light once in a year.

Blair cribbed a week's holiday at Michaelmas, and went down to be married. We saw them at the week's end as they passed through Worcester station. Mary looked the same sweet girl as ever, in the same quiet grey dress (or another that was related to it); and Blair was jolly. He clasped hold of the Squire's hands as if he wanted to take them with him. We handed in a big basket of nectarines and grapes from Mrs. Todhetley; and Mary's nice face smiled and nodded her thanks to the last, as the train puffed on.

“Good luck to them!” said Tod.

Good luck to them! You will hear what luck they had.

For this is *not* the end of that Sunday night's work, or it would have hardly been worth relating, seeing that people get married every day, and nobody thinks cheese of it but themselves. The end has to come. And I knew from the first it could not all be got into one paper.

XII.

JERRY'S GAZETTE.

THE school, taken to by Mr. Blair, was in one of the suburbs of London. It may be as well not to mention which ; but some of the families yet living there cannot fail to remember the circumstances when they read this. For what I am going to tell you of is true. It did not happen last year ; nor the year before. When it did, is of no consequence to anybody.

When Pyefinch Blair got into the house, he found that it had some dilapidations, which had escaped his notice, and would have to be repaired. Not an uncommon case by any means. Mr. Blair paid the four hundred pounds for the school, including furniture and goodwill, and that drained him of his money. It was not a bad bargain, as bargains go. He had then the house put into fair order, and bought in a little more furniture that seemed to him necessary, intending his boys should be comfortable, as well as the young wife he was soon to bring home.

The school did not profess to be one of those

higher-class ones that charge a hundred a year and extras. It was of moderate terms and moderate size ; the pupils being mostly sons of well-to-do tradesmen, some of them living on the spot. At first, Blair (bringing with him his Cambridge notions) entertained thoughts of raising the school to a higher price and standard. But it would have been a risk ; almost like beginning a fresh venture. And when he found that the school paid well, and masters and boys alike got on comfortably, he dropped the wish.

More than two years went by. One evening, early in February, Mrs. Blair was sitting by the parlour fire after tea, with a great boy on her lap, who was forward with his tongue, and could say pa-pa, ma-ma, and had just begun to walk in a totter. I don't think you could have seen much difference in *her* from what she was as Mary Sanker. She had the same neat kind of dress and quiet manner, the fresh gentle face and sweet eyes, and the pretty, smooth brown hair. Her husband told her sometimes that she would spoil the boys with kindness. If any one got into disgrace, she was sure to beg him off ; it was wonderful what a good mother she was to them, and only twenty-four years old yet.

Mr. Blair was striding the carpet with his head down, like one in perplexed thought, a great scowl upon his brow. It was something

unusual, for he was always bright. He was as slender and good-looking a fellow as he used to be. Mrs. Blair noticed him and spoke.

"Have you the headache, Pyefinch?" She had long ago got over the odd sound of his Christian name. Habit smoothes most things.

"No."

"What is it, then?"

He did not make any answer; seemed not to hear her. Mrs. Blair put the boy down on the hearth-rug. The child was baptized Joseph, after Squire Todhetley, whom they persisted in calling their best friend.

"Run to papa, Joe. Ask him what the matter is."

The young gentleman went swaying across the carpet, with some unintelligible language of his own. Mr. Blair had no resource but to pick him up: and he carried him back to his mother.

"What is the matter, Pyefinch?" she asked again, catching his hand. "I am sure you are not well."

"I am quite well," he said; "but I have got into a little bother lately. What ails me this evening is, that I find I must tell you of it, and I don't like to. There, Mary, send the child away."

She knew the nursemaid was busy; would not ring, but carried him out herself. Mr. Blair was sitting down when she returned, staring into the fire.

"I had hoped you would never know it, Mary; I had not intended that you should. The fact is——"

Mr. Blair stopped. His wife glanced at him; a serenely earnest calm in her eyes, a firm reliance in her loving tone.

"Do not hesitate, Pyefinch. The greater the calamity, the more need there is that I should hear it."

"Nay, it is no such great mischief as to be called a calamity. When I took to this house and school, I incurred a debt, and I am suddenly called upon to pay it."

"Do you mean Mr. Todhetley's?"

A passing smile at the question crossed the schoolmaster's face. "Mr. Todhetley's was a present; I thought you understood that, Mary. When I would have spoken of returning it, you may remember that he went into a passion."

"What debt is it, then?"

"I paid four hundred pounds, you know, to take to the school; half of it I had saved; the other was given by Mr. Todhetley. Well and good, so far. But I had not thought of one thing—the money that would be wanted for current expenses, and for the hundred and one odd things that stare you in the face upon taking to a new concern. Repairs had to be done, needful furniture to be got in; and not a penny coming in until the end of the quarter: not much then, for most of the boys pay half-yearly.

Lockett, who was down here most days, saw that if I could not get some money to go on with, there'd be no resource but to re-sell the school. He bestirred himself, and got me the loan of a hundred and fifty pounds from a friend, at only five per cent. interest. This money I am suddenly called upon to repay."

"But why?"

"Because he from whom I had it is dead, and the executors have called it in. It was Mr. Wells."

She recognized the name as that of a gentleman with whom they had been slightly acquainted; he had died suddenly, in the prime of life.

"Has any of it been paid off?"

"None. I could have repaid a portion every half-year as it came round, but Mr. Wells would not let me. 'You had a great deal better use it in improving the school and getting things comfortable about you; I am in no hurry,' was his invariable rejoinder. Lockett thought he meant eventually to make me a present of the money, being a wealthy man, without near relatives. Of course I never looked for anything of the sort; but I was as easy as to the debt as though I had not contracted it."

"Will the executors not let you have the use of the money still?"

"You should see their curt note, ordering its immediate repayment! Lockett seems more

vexed at the turn affairs have taken than even I am. He was here to-day."

Mrs. Blair sat in silent reflection, wishing she had known of this. Many an odd shilling that she had thought justified in spending, she would willingly have recalled now. Not that they could have amounted to much in the aggregate. Presently she looked at her husband.

"Pyefinch, it seems to me that there's only one thing to do. You must borrow the sum from some one else, which of course will make us only as much in debt as we are now; and we must pay it off by instalments as quickly as we possibly can."

"It is what Lockett and I have decided on already as the only course. Why, Mary, this worry has been on our minds for a fortnight past," he added, turning quickly. "But now that it has come to borrowing again, and not from a friend, I felt I ought to tell you. Besides, there's another thing."

"Go on," she said.

"We have found a man to advance the money. Lockett and I picked him out from the *Times* advertisements. These fellows are awful rogues, for the most part; but this is not one of the worst. Lockett made inquiries of a parishioner of his who understands these things, and finds Gavity (that's his name) is tolerably fair for a professional money-lender. I shall have to pay him higher interest. And

he wants me to give him a bill of sale on the furniture."

"A bill of sale on the furniture! What is that?"

"That is what I meant when I said there was another thing," replied Mr. Blair. "Wells was content with my note of hand; this man requires tangible security on my goods. It is a mere matter of form in my case, he says. As I am doing well, and there's no fear of my not keeping the interest paid up, I suppose it is. In two or three years from this, all being well, the debt itself will be wiped off."

"Oh, yes; I hope so. The school is quite prosperous."

Her tone was anxious, and Mr. Blair detected it. But for considering she ought to know it, he would rather have kept this trouble to himself. And he was not sure upon another point: whether, in giving this bill of sale upon the furniture, Mr. Gavity might deem it essential to come in and take a list, article by article, bed by bed, table by table. If so, it would not have been possible to conceal it from her. He mentioned this. She, with himself, could not understand the necessity of their furniture being brought into the transaction at all, seeing that there could be no doubt as to their ability to repay. The one knew just as much about bills of sale and the rights they gave, as the other: and, that, was nothing.

And now that the communication to his wife was off his mind—for in that had lain the weight—Mr. Blair was more at ease. As they sat talking together, discussing the future in all its aspects, the shade lifted itself, and things looked brighter. It did not seem to either of them so formidable a cloud after all. It was but the changing the one creditor for another, and the paying a little higher interest.

The transaction was accomplished. Gavity advanced the money, and took the bill of sale upon the furniture. He shot up the expenses—which money-lenders of his stamp mostly do—and made out the loan to be a hundred and eighty, instead of a hundred and fifty. Still, taking things for all in all, the position was perhaps as fair and hopeful a one as can be experienced under debt. It was but a temporary clog; Mr. and Mrs. Blair both knew that. The school was flourishing; their prospects were good; they were young, and healthy, and hopeful. And though Mr. Gavity would of course exact his rights to the uttermost farthing, he had no intention of playing the rogue. In all candour let it be avowed, the gentleman money-lender did not see that it was a case affording scope for it.

I had to tell that much as well as I could,

seeing that it only came to me by hearsay in the future.

And now to go back a little while, and to ourselves at Dyke Manor.

After their marriage the Squire did not lose sight of Mr. and Mrs. Blair. A basket of things went up now and then, and the second Christmas they were invited to come down; but Mary wrote to decline, on account of the baby—Joe. “Let them leave Joe at home,” cried Tod; but Mrs. Todhetley, shaking her head, said that the dear little infant would come to sad grief without its mother. Soon after that, when the Squire was in London, he took the omnibus and went to see them, and told us how comfortably they were getting on.

Years went round to another Christmas, when the exacting Joe would be some months over two years old. In the passing of time you are apt to lose sight of interests, unless they are close ones; and for some months we had heard nothing of the Blairs. Mrs. Todhetley spoke of it one evening.

“Send them a Christmas hamper,” said the Squire.

The Christmas hamper went. With a turkey and ham, and a brace of pheasants in it; some bacon and apples to fill up, and sweet herbs and onions. Lena put in her favourite doll, dressed as a little mother, for young Joe. It had a false arm; and no legs, so to say:

Hugh cut the feet off one day, and Hannah had to sew the stumps up. We hoped they would enjoy it all, including the doll, and drank good luck to them on Christmas Day.

A week and a half went on, and no news came. Mrs. Todhetley grew uneasy about the hamper, feeling sure it had been confiscated by the railway. Mary Blair had always written so promptly to acknowledge everything sent.

One January day the letter came in by the afternoon post. We knew Mary's handwriting. The Squire and Madam were at the Sterlings', and it was nine o'clock at night when they drove in. Mrs. Todhetley's face ached, which was quite customary: she had a white hand-kerchief tied round it. When they were seated round the fire, I remembered the letter, and gave it to her.

"Now to hear the fate of the hamper!" she exclaimed, carrying it to the lamp. But, what with the face-ache, and what with her eyes, which were not so good by candle-light as they used to be, Mrs. Todhetley could not read the contents off readily. She looked at the writing, page after page, and then gave a short scream of dismay. Something was wrong.

"Those thieves have grabbed the hamper!" cried the Squire.

"No; I think the Blairs have had the hamper. I fear it is something worse," she said faintly. "Perhaps you will read it aloud."

The Squire put his spectacles on as he took the letter. We gathered round the table, waiting. Mrs. Todhetley sat with her head aside, nursing her cheek; and Tod, who had been reading, put his book down. The Squire hammered a good deal over the writing, which was not so legible as Mary's was in general. She appeared to have meant it for Mrs. Todhetley and the Squire jointly.

“‘‘MY VERY DEAR FRIENDS,—If I have delayed writing to you it was not for want of ingredients’’——

“‘‘Ingredients !’’ cried one of us.

“‘‘It must be gratitude,’’ corrected the Squire.
“‘‘Don’t interrupt.’’

“‘‘Gratitude for your most welcome and liberal present, but because my heart and hands have alike shrunk from the ex—ex—explanation it must entail. Alas ! a series of very terrible misfortunes have overwomed—overwhelmed us. We have had to give up our school and our prospects together, and to turn out of our once happy dome.’’

“‘‘Dome !’’ put in Tod.

“‘‘I suppose it’s home,’’ said the Squire.
“‘‘This confounded lamp is as dim as it can be to-night !’’ And he went on fractiously.

“‘‘Through no fault of my husband’s he had to borrow a hundred and fifty pounds nearly twelve months ago. The man he had it from

was a money-lender, a Mr. Gavity ; he charged a high rate of interest, and brought the costs up to about thirty pounds ; but we have no reason to think he wished to act un—unfair—unfairly by us. He required security—which I suppose was only reasonable. The Reverend Mr. Lockett offered himself as such ; but Gavity said parsons were slippers.'"

"Good gracious!" said Mrs. Todhetley.

"The word's slippery, I expect," cried the Squire with a frown. "One would think she had emptied the water-bottle into the ink-pot."

"'Gavity said parsons were slippery ; meaning that they were often worth no more than their word. He took, as security, a bill of sale on the furnace. Stay,—furniture. Our school was quite prosperous ; there was not the slightest doubt that in a short while the whole of the debt could be cleared off ; so we had no hesitation in letting him have the bill of sale. And no harm would have come of it, but for one dreadful misfortune, which (as it seems) was a necessary part of the attendant proceedings. My husband got put into Jer—Jer—Jerry's Gazelle.'"

"Jerry's Gazelle?"

"Jerry's Gazette," corrected the Squire.

"Jerry's Gazette?"

The lot of us spoke at once. He stared at the letters and then at us. We stared back again.

"It is Jerry's Gazette—as I think. Come and see, Joe."

Tod looked over the Squire's shoulder. It certainly looked like "Jerry's Gazette," he said; but the ink was pale.

"Jerry's Gazette. Go on, father. Perhaps you'll find an explanation further on."

"This Jerry's Gazette, it appears, is circulated chiefly (and I think privately) amongst comical men—commercial men; merchants, and tradespeople. When they read its list of names, they know at once who is in difficulties. Of course they saw my husband's name there, Pyefinch Blair; unfortunately a name so peculiar as not to admit of doubt. I did not see the Gazette, but I believe the amount of the debt was stated, and that Gavity (but I don't know whether he was mentioned by name) had a bill of sale on our household furniture."

"What the dickens is Jerry's Gazette?" burst forth the Squire, giving the letter a passionate fling. "I know but of one Gazette, into which men of all conditions go, whether they are made lords or bankrupts. What's this other thing?"

He put up his spectacles, and stared at us all again, as if expecting an answer. But he might as well have asked it of the moon. Mrs. Todhetley sat with the most helpless look you ever saw on her face. So he took up the reading again.

“‘ We knew nothing about Jerry’s Gazette ourselves, or that there was such a pub—pub—publication, or that the transaction had appeared in it ; and could not imagine why the school began to fall off. Some of the pupils were taken away *at once*, some at Lady-day ; and by Midsummer nearly every one had left. We used to lie awake night after night, grieving and wondering what could be the matter, searching in vain for any cause of offence, given unwittingly to the boys or their parents. Often and often we got up in the morning to go about our day’s work, never having closed our eyes. At last, a gentleman, whose son had been one of the first renewed—removed, told Pyefinch the truth : that he had appeared in Jerry’s Gazette. The fathers who subscribed to Jerry’s Gazette had seen it for themselves ; and they informed the others.’”

“‘ The devil take Jerry’s Gazette,’ ” interrupted Tod, deliberately. “‘ This reads like an episode of the Secret Inquisition, sir, in the days of the French Revolution.’ ”

“‘ It reads like a thing that an honest Englishman’s ears ought to redden to hear of,’ ” answered the Squire, as he lifted the lamp nearer, for his outstretched arms were getting cramped.

“‘ Pyefinch went round to every one of the boys’ fathers. Some would not see him, some not hear him ; but to those who did, he im-

ported—imparted—the whole circumstances ; showing how it was he had had to borrow the money (or rather to re-borrow it, but I have not time in this letter to go so far into detail), and that it could not by any possibility injure the boys or touch their interests. Most of them, he said, were very kind and sympathising, so far as words went, saying that in this case Jerry's Gazette appeared to have been the means of inflicting a cruel wrong ; but they would not agree to replace their sons with us. They either declined point-blank, or said they'd consider of it ; but you see the greater portion of the boys were already placed at other schools. All of them told Pyefinch one thing—that they were thoroughly satisfied with his treatment in every respect, and but for this interruption would probably have left their sons with him as long as they wanted intrusion—instruction. The long and short of it was this, my dear friends : they did not choose to have their sons educated by a man who was looked upon in the commercial world as next door to a bankrupt. One of them delicately hinted as much, and said Mr. Blair must be aware that he was liable to have his house topped—stripped—at any moment under the bill of sale. We said to ourselves that evening, as Pyefinch and I talked together, that we might have removed boys of our own from a school under the like circumstances.””

“That’s true enough,” murmured Mrs. Todhetley.

“My letter has grown very long and I must hasten to conclude it. Just before the rent was due at Michaelmas (we paid it half-yearly, by agreement) Gavity put the bill of sale into force. One morning several men came in and swept off the furniture. We were turned out next: though indeed to have attempted to remain in that large house were folly. The landlord came in a passion, and told Pyefinch that he would put him in prison if he were worth it; as he was not, he had better go out of the pitch-place—forthwith, as another tenant was ready to take possession. Since then we have been staying here, Pyefinch vainly seeking to get some profitable employment. What we hoped was, that he would obtain an under-mastership to some public fool——”

“Fool, sir !”

“School. But it seems difficult. He sends his best regards to you, and bids me say that the reason you have not heard from us so long is, that we could not bear to tell you the ill news after your former kindness to us. The arrival of the hamper leaves us no resource.

“Thank you for that. Thank you very truly. The people at the old house have our address, and re-directed it here. We received it early on Christmas Eve. How good the things were, you do not need to be told. I stuffed the turkey

—I shall make a famous cook in time—and sent it to the backhouse—bakehouse. You should have seen the pill—picture—it was when it came home. Believe me, my dear friends, we are both of us grateful for all your kindness to us, present and past. Little Joe is so delighted with the doll; he scarcely puts it out of his arms. Our best love to all; including Hugh and Lena. Thank Johnny for the beautiful new book he put in. I must apologize in conclusion for my writing; the ink we get in these penny bottles is pale; and baby has been on my lap all the time, never easy a minute. Do not say anything of all this, please, should you be writing to Wales. Ever most truly yours,

“ MARY BLAIR.

“ 13, Difford's Buildings, Paddington.”

The Squire put the letter down and his spectacles on it, quite solemnly. You might have heard a pin drop in the room.

“ This is a thing that must be inquired into. I shall go up to-morrow.”

“ And I'd go too, sir, but for my engagement to the Whitneys,” said Tod.

“ She must mean, in speaking of a baby, that there's another,” spoke Mrs. Todhetley, in a frightened sort of whisper. “ Besides little Joe. Dear me !”

“ I don't understand it,” stamped the Squire, getting red. “ Turned out of house and home

through Jerry's Gazette ! Do we live in England, I'd like to ask ?—under English laws ?—enjoying English rights and freedom ? Jerry's Gazette ? What the deuce *is* Jerry's Gazette ? Where does it come out of ? What issues it ? The Lord Chamberlain's Office ?—or Scotland Yard ?—or some Patent society that we've not heard of, down here ? The girl must have been imposed upon : her statement won't hold water."

" It looks as though she had been, sir."

" *Looks* like it, Johnny ! it must be so," said the Squire, getting warmer. " I have temporary need of a loan of money, and I borrow it in straightforward fairness, honestly purposing and undertaking to pay it back with good interest, but not exactly wanting my neighbours to know ; and you'd like me to believe that there's some association, or publication, or whatever else it may be, that won't allow this to be done privately, but must pounce upon the transaction, and take it down in print, and send it round to the public, just as if it were a wedding or a burying ! "

The Squire had grown redder than a roost-cock. He always did when tremendously put out, and the matter would not admit of calling in old Jones the constable.

" Folly ! Moonshine ! Blair, poor fellow, has been slipping into some damaging disaster, had his furniture seized, and so invents this fable to appease his wife, not liking to tell her

the truth. Jerry's Gazette! When I was a youngster, my father took me to see an exhibition in Worcester called 'Jerry's Dogs.' The worst damage you could get there was a cold, from the holes in the canvas roof, or a pitch over the front into the sawdust. But in Jerry's Gazette, according to this tale, you may be damaged for life. Don't tell me! Do we live in Austria, or France, or any of those places, where—as it's said—a man can't so much as put on a pair of clean stockings in a morning, but it's laid before high quarters in black and white at mid-day by the secret police! No, you need not tell me that."

"I never heard of Jerry's Gazette in all my life; I don't know whether it is a stage performance or something to eat; but I feel convinced Mary Blair would not write this without having some good grounds for it," said Tod, bold as usual.

And do you know—though you may be slow to believe it—the Squire had taken latterly to listen to him. He turned his old red face on him now, and some of its fierceness went out of it.

"Then, Joe, all I can say is this—that English honour and English notions have changed uncommonly from what they used to be. 'Live and let live' was one of our mottoes; and most of us tried to act up to it. I know no more of this," striking his hand on the

letter, "than you know, boys ; and I cannot think but that she must have been under some unaccountable mistake in writing it. Any way, I'll go up to London to-morrow : and if you like, Johnny, you can go with me."

We went up. I did not feel sure of it until the train was off, for Tod seemed three-parts inclined to give up the shooting at the Whitneys', and start for London instead ; in which case the Squire might not have taken me. Tod and some more young fellows were invited to Whitney Hall for three days, to a shooting-match.

It was dusk when we reached London, and as cold as charity. The Squire turned into the railway hotel and had some chops served, but did not wait for a regular dinner. When once he was in for impatience, he *was* in for it.

"Difford's Buildings, Paddington," had been the address, so we thought it would not be far to go. The Squire held on in his way along the crowded streets, as if he were about to set things straight to rights, elbowing the people, and asking the road at every turn. Some did not know Difford's Buildings, and some directed us wrongly ; but we got there at last. It was in a narrow, quiet street ; a row of what Londoners call eight-roomed houses, with little gates opening to the square patches of smoky garden, and "Difford's Buildings" written up as large as life at the corner.

"Let's see," said the Squire, looking side-

ways at the windows. "Number thirteen, was it not, Johnny?"

"Yes, sir."

Difford's Buildings was not well lighted, and there was no seeing the numbers. The Squire stopped before the one he thought must be thirteen; when somebody came out at the house-door, shutting it behind him, and encountered us at the gate. A youngish clergyman in a white necktie. He and the Squire stood looking at each other in the semi-darkness.

"Can you tell me if Mr. Blair lives here?"

"Yes, he does," was the answer. "I think—I think I have the pleasure of speaking to Mr. Todhetley."

The Squire knew him then—the Rev. Mr. Lockett. They had met when Blair first took to the school.

"What *is* all this extraordinary history?" burst forth the Squire, seizing him by the button of his great-coat, and taking him a few gates further on. "Mrs. Blair has been writing us a strange rigmarole, which nobody can make head or tail of; about ruin, and sales, and something she calls Jerry's Gazette."

"Ay," quietly answered the clergyman in a tone of pain, as he put his arm inside the Squire's, and they paced slowly up and down. "It is one of the saddest histories my experience has ever had to do with."

The Squire was near coming to an explosion

in the open street. "Will you be pleased to tell me, sir, whether there exists such a thing as Jerry's Gazette, or whether it is a fable? I have heard of Jerry's Performing Dogs; went to see 'em once: but I don't know what this other invention can be."

"Certainly there is such a thing," said Mr. Lockett. "It is, I fancy, a list of people who unfortunately get into difficulties; at least, people who fall into difficulties seem to get published in it. I am told it is meant chiefly for private circulation: which may imply, as I imagine (but here I may be wrong) what may be called secret circulation. Blair had occasion to borrow a little money, and *his* name appeared in it. From that moment he was a marked man, and his school fell off."

"Goodness bless my soul!" cried the Squire solemnly, completely taken aback at hearing Mary's letter confirmed. "Who gives Jerry's Gazette the right to do this?"

"I don't know about the right. It seems it has the power."

"It is a power I never heard of before, sir. We've got a parson, down our way, who tells us every Sunday the world's coming to an end. I think it must be. I know it's getting too clever for me to understand. If a man has the misfortune (perhaps after years of private struggle that nobody knows anything about but himself) to break up at last, he goes into the land's

Gazette in a straightforward manner, and the public read it over their breakfast-tables, and there's nothing underhand about it. But as to this other thing—if I comprehend the matter rightly—Blair did not as much as know of its existence, or that his name was going into it."

"I am sure he did not ; or I, either," said Mr. Lockett.

"I'd like its meaning explained, then," cried the Squire, getting hotter and angrier. "Is it a fair, upright, honest thing ; or is it a kind of Spanish Inquisition ?"

"I cannot tell you," answered the parson, as they both stood still. "Mr. Blair was informed by the father of one of his pupils that he believed the sheet was first of all set up as a speculation, and was found to answer so well that it became quite an institution. I do not know whether this is true."

"I have heard of an institution for idiots, but I never heard of one for selling up men's chairs and tables," stormed the Squire. "No, sir, and I don't believe it now. I might take up my standing to-morrow on the top of the Monument, and say to the public, 'Here I am, and I'll ferret out what I can about you, and whisper it to one another of you ;' and so bring a serpent's trail on the unsuspecting heads, and altogether play Old Gooseberry with the crowds below me. Do you suppose, sir, the Lord

Chancellor would wink his eye at me, stuck aloft there at my work, and would tolerate such a spectacle?"

"I fear the Lord Chancellor has not much to do with it," said Mr. Lockett, smiling at the Squire's logic.

"Then suppose we say good men—public opinion—commercial justice and honour? Come!"

He shook the frail railings, on which his hand was resting, till they nearly came to grief. Mr. Lockett related the particulars of the transaction from the beginning; the original debt, which Blair was suddenly called upon to pay off, and the contraction of the one to Gavity. He said that he himself had had as much to do with it as Blair, in the capacity of friend and adviser, and felt almost as though he were responsible for the turn affairs had taken; which had caused him scarcely to enjoy an easy moment since. The Squire began to abuse Gavity, but Mr. Lockett said that the man did not appear to have had any ill intention. As to his having sold off the goods—if he had not sold them, the landlord would.

"And what's Blair doing now?" asked Mr. Todhetley.

"Battling with illness for his life," said the clergyman. "I have just been praying with him."

The Squire retreated to the lamp-post, as if

somebody had knocked him backwards. Mr. Lockett explained further.

It was in September that they had left their home. His own lodging and the church of which he was curate were in Paddington, and he found rooms for Blair and his wife in the same neighbourhood—two parlours in Difford's Buildings. Blair (who had lost heart terribly, so as to be good for little) spared no time or exertion in seeking for something to do. He tried to get in at King's College ; they liked his appearance and testimonials, but at present had no vacancy : he tried in private schools for an ushership ; but he did not get one : nothing seemed to be vacant just then. Then he tried for a clerk's place. Day after day, sick or well, rain or fine, breakfastless or full of bread, he went tramping about London streets. At last, one of those who had had sons at his school, gave him some out-door employment—the making known a new invention from shop to shop, and soliciting customers for it : Blair to be paid on commission according to his success. Naturally, he did not let weather stop him, and would come home to Difford's Buildings at night, wet through. There had been a great deal of rain in November and December. But he got wet once too often, and was attacked with rheumatic fever. The fever was better now ; the weakness it had left was more dangerous.

“ She did not say anything about this in her letter,” interrupted the Squire resentfully, when Mr. Lockett had explained so far.

“ Blair told her not to. He thought if their position were revealed to the friends who had once shown themselves so kind, it might look almost like begging for help again.”

“ Blair’s a fool ! ” roared the Squire.

“ Mrs. Blair has not made the worst of it to her family in Wales. It would only distress them, she says, for they could not help her. Mr. Sanker has been ill again for some time past, has not been allowed, I believe, to draw his full salary, and there’s no doubt they want every penny of their means for themselves ; and more too.”

“ How have they lived here ? ” asked the Squire, as we went back slowly to the gate.

“ Blair earned a little commission while he could get about ; and his wife has been enabled to procure some kind of wool-work from a warehouse in the city, which pays her very well,” said the clergyman, dropping his voice to a whisper, as if he feared to be heard through the shutters. “ Unfortunately there’s the baby to take up much of her time. It was born in October, soon after they got in here.”

“ And I should like to know what business there has to be a baby ? ” cried the Squire, who was like a man off his head. “ Couldn’t

the baby have waited to come at a more convenient season ? ”

“ It might have been better ; it is certainly a troublesome, crying little thing,” said the parson. “ Yes, you can go straight in : the parlour door is on the right. I have a service this evening at seven, and shall be late for it. This is your son, I presume, sir ? ”

“ My son ! law bless you ! My son is a strapping young fellow, six feet two in his stockings. This is Johnny Ludlow.”

He shook hands pleasantly, and was good enough to say he had heard of me. The Squire went on, and I with him. There was no lamp in the passage, and we had to feel on the right for the parlour door.

“ Come in,” called out Mary, in answer to the knock. I knew her voice again.

We can’t help our thoughts. Things come into the mind without leave or licence ; and it is no use saying they ought not to, or asking why they do. Nearly close opposite the door in the small room was the fire-place. Mary Blair sat on a low stool before it, doing some work with coloured wools with a big hooked needle, a baby, in white, lying flat on her lap, and the little chap, Joe, sitting at her feet. All in a moment it put me in mind of Mrs. Lease, sitting on her stool before the fire that day long ago (though in point of fact, as I discovered afterwards, hers had been a bucket turned up-

side down) with the sick child on her lap, and the other little ones round her. Why this, to-night, should have reminded me of that other, I cannot say, but it did ; and in the light of an omen. You must ridicule me if you choose : it is not my fault ; and I am telling nothing but the truth. Lease had died. Would Pyefinch Blair die ?

The Squire went in gingerly, as if he had been treading on a spiked ploughshare. The candle stood on the mantle-piece, a table was pushed back under the window. Altogether the room was poor, and a small saucepan simmered on the hob by the fire. Mary turned her head, and got up with a flushed face, letting the work fall on the baby's white nightgown, as she held out her hand. Little Joe, a sturdy fellow in a scarlet frock, with big brown eyes, backed against the wall by the fire-place and stood staring, Lena's doll held for safety under his pinafore, its legs projecting upwards.

She lost her presence of mind. The Squire was the veriest old stupid, when he wanted to make-believe, that you'd see in a winter's day. He began saying something about "happening to be in town, and so called." But he broke down, and blurted out the truth. "We've come to see after you, my dear ; and to learn what all this trouble means."

And then *she* broke down. Perhaps it was the sight of us, recalling the old time at Dyke

Manor, when the future looked so fair and happy; perhaps it was the mention of the trouble. She spread her hands before her face, and the tears rained through her fingers.

"Shut the door for me, will you, Johnny," she whispered. "Very softly."

It was the other door she pointed to, one at the end of the room, and I latched it without noise. Save for a sob now and again, that she kept as silent as she could, the grief passed. Young Joe, frightened at matters, suddenly went at her, full butt, and hid his eyes in her petticoats with a roar. I took him on my knee and got him round again. Somehow children are never afraid of me. The Squire rubbed up his old red nose, and said he had a cold.

But, was she not altered! Now that the flush had faded, and the emotion passed, the once sweet, fresh, blooming face stood out in its naked reality. Sweet, indeed, it was still; but the bloom and freshness had given place to a haggard look, and to dark circles round the soft brown eyes, weary now.

She had no more to tell of the past calamities than her letter and Mr. Lockett had told. Jerry's Gazette was the sore point with the Squire, but she seemed not to understand it better than we did.

"I want to know one thing," said he, quite fiercely. "How did Jerry's Gazette get at the

transaction between your husband and Gavity? Did Gavity go to it, opened-mouthed, with the news?"

Mary did not know. She had heard something about a register—that the bill of sale had to be registered somewhere, and thought Jerry's Gazette might have got at the information from that source.

"Heaven bless us all!" cried the Squire. "Can't a man borrow a bit of money but it must become known to his enemies, if he's got any, bringing them down upon him like a pack of wolves in full cry? This used to be the freest land on earth."

The baby began to scream. She put down the wool-work, and hushed it to her. I am sure the Squire had half a mind to tell her to give it a gentle shaking. He looked upon screaming babies as natural enemies: the truth is, with all his abuse, he was afraid of them.

"Has it got a name?" he asked gruffly.

"Yes—Mary: he wished it," she said, glancing at the end door. "I thought we should have had to call it Polly, in contradistinction to mine."

Polly! That was another coincidence. Lease's eldest girl was Polly. And what made her speak of things in the past tense? She caught me looking at her; she caught, I am afraid, the fear on my face. I told her in a hurry that little Joe must be a Dutchman, for

not a word could I understand of the tale he was whispering about his doll.

What with Mary's work, and the little earned by Blair while he was about, they had not wanted for necessaries in a plain way. I suppose Lockett took care they should not: but he was only a curate.

The baby needed its supper, to judge by the squealing. Mary poured the contents of the saucepan—some thin gruel—into a saucer, and began feeding the little mite by teaspoonfuls, putting each one to her own lips first to test its coolness.

"That's poor stuff for it," cried the Squire, in a half-pitying, half-cross tone, his mind divided between resentment against babies in general and sympathy with this one. As the baby was there, of course it had to be fed, but what he wanted to know was, why it need have come just when trouble was about. When put out, he had no reason at all. Mrs. Blair suddenly turned her face towards the end door, listening; and we heard a faint voice calling "Mary."

"Joe, dear, go and tell papa that I will be with him in one minute."

The little chap slid down, leaving me his doll to nurse, and went pattering across the carpet, standing on tiptoe to open the door. The Squire said he should like to go in and see Blair. Mary went on first to warn him of our advent.

My goodness ! *That* Pyefinch Blair, who used to flourish his cane, and cock it over us boys at Frost's ! I should never have known him for the same.

He lay in bed, too weak to raise his head from the pillow, the white skin drawn tightly over his hollow features ; and the cheek-bones taking a tinge of colour as he watched us coming. And again I thought of Lease ; for the same grey look was on his face that had been on his when he was dying.

“ Lord bless us ! ” cried the Squire, in what would have been a solemn tone but for surprise. And Mr. Blair began faintly to offer a kind of apology for his illness, hoping he should soon get over it now.

It was nothing but the awful look, putting one unpleasantly in mind of death, that kept the Squire from breaking out with a storm of abuse all round. Why could they not have sent word to Dyke Manor, he wanted to know. As to asking particulars about Jerry's Gazette, which the Squire's tongue was burning for, Blair was too far gone. While we stood there the doctor came in ; a little man in spectacles, a friend of Mr. Lockett's. He told Blair he was getting on all right, spoke to Mrs. Blair, and took his departure. The Squire, wishing good-night in a hurry, went out after the doctor, and collared him as he was walking up the street.

"Won't he get over it?"

"Well, sir, I am afraid not. His state of weakness is alarming."

The Squire turned on him with a storm, just as though he had known him for years: asking why on earth Blair's friends (meaning himself) had not been written to, and promising a prosecution if he let him die. The doctor took it sensibly, and was as cool as iced water.

"We medical men are gifted at best but with human skill, sir," he said, looking the Squire full in the face.

"Blair is young—not much turned thirty."

"The young die as well as the old, when it pleases Heaven to take them."

"But it doesn't please Heaven to take *him*," retorted the Squire, worked up to the pitch that he was not accountable for his words. "But that you seem in earnest, young man, probably meaning no irreverence, I'd ask you how you dare bring Heaven's name into such a case as this? Did Heaven fling him out of house and home into Jerry's Gazette, do you suppose? Or did man? Man did, sir: selfish, hard, unjust man. Don't talk to me, Mr. Doctor, about Heaven."

"All I wished to imply, sir, was, that Mr. Blair's life is not in my power, or in that of any human hands," said the doctor, when he had listened quietly to the end. "I will do my best to bring him round; I can do no more."

"You must bring him round."

"There can be no 'must' in regard to it: and I doubt if he is to be brought round. Mr. Blair has not naturally a large amount of what we call stamina, and the illness has laid a very serious hold of him. It would be something in his favour if the mind were at ease: which of course it cannot be under his circumstances."

"Now look here—you just say outright he is going to die," stormed the Squire. "Say it and have done with it. I like people to be honest."

"But I cannot say he is. Possibly he may get well. His life and his death both seem to hang on the turn of a thread."

"And there's that squealing young image within ear-shot! Could Blair be got down to my place in the country? You might come with him if you liked. There's some shooting."

"Not yet awhile. It would kill him. What we have to fight against now is the weakness: and a fight it is."

The Squire's face was rueful. "This London has a reputation for clever physicians: you pick out the best, and bring him here with you to-morrow morning. Do you hear, sir?"

"I will bring one, if you wish it. It is not essential."

"Not essential!" wrathfully echoed the Squire. "If Blair's recovery is not essential, perhaps you'll tell me, sir, whose is! What is to become of his poor young wife if he dies?"

—and the little fellow with the doll?—and that cross-grained puppet in white? Who will provide for them? Let me tell you, sir, that I won't have him die—if doctors can keep him from it. He belongs to me, sir, in a manner: he saved my son's life—as fine a fellow as you could set eyes on, six feet two without his boots. Not essential! What next?"

"It is not so much medical skill he requires now, as care, and rest, and renovation," spoke the doctor in his calm way.

"Never mind. You take a physician to him, and let him attend him with you, and don't spare expense. In all my life I never saw anybody want patching up so much as he wants it."

The Squire shook hands with him, and went on round the corner. I was following, when the doctor touched me on the shoulder.

"He has a good heart, for all his hot speech," whispered he, nodding towards the Squire. "In talking with him this evening, when you find him indulging hopes of Blair's recovery, *don't encourage them*: rather lead him, if possible, to look on the other side of the question."

The surgeon was off before I recovered my surprise. But it was now my turn to run after him.

"Do you know that he will not get well, sir?"

"I do not know it; the sick and the well are alike in the hands of God; but I think it scarcely possible that he can," was the

answer ; and the voice had a solemn tone, the face a solemn aspect, in the street's uncertain light. "And I would prepare friends always to meet the worst when in my power."

"Now then, Johnny ! You were going to take the wrong turning were you, sir ! Let me tell you, you might get lost in London before knowing it."

The Squire had come back to the corner of the street, looking for me. I walked on by his side in silence, feeling half dazed, the hopeless words playing pranks in my brain.

"Johnny, I wonder where we can find a telegraph office ? I shall telegraph to your mother to send up Hannah to-morrow. Hannah knows what the sick need : and that poor thing with her children ought not to be left alone."

But as to giving any hint to the Squire of the state of affairs, I should like the doctor to have tried at it himself. Before I had finished the first syllable, he attacked me as if I had been a tiger ; demanding whether those were my ideas of Christianity, and if I supposed there'd be any justice in a man's dying because he had got into Jerry's Gazette.

In the morning the Squire went on an expedition to Gavity's office in the city. It was a dull place of two rooms, and a man to answer people. We had not been a minute there when the Squire began to explode, going on like anything at the man for saying Mr. Gavity was

engaged and could not be seen. The Squire demanded if he thought we were creditors, that he should deny Gavity.

What with his looks and his insistence, and his promise to bring in Sir Richard Mayne, he got to see Gavity. We went into a good room with a soft red carpet and marble-topped desk in it. Mr. Gavity politely motioned to chairs before the blazing fire, and I sat down.

Not the Squire. Out it all came. He walked about the room, just as he walked at home when he was in a way, and said all kinds of things ; wanting to know who had ruined Pye-finch Blair, and what Jerry's Gazette meant. Gavity seemed to be used to explosions : he took it so coolly.

When the Squire calmed down, he nearly grew to see things in Gavity's own light—namely, that Gavity had not been to blame. To say the truth, I could not understand that he had. Except in selling them up. And Gavity said if he had not done it, the landlord would.

So nothing was left for the Squire to vent his wrath on but Jerry's Gazette. He no more understood what Jerry's Gazette really was, or whether it was a good or bad thing in itself, than he understood the construction of the planet Jupiter. It's well Dwarf Giles was not present. The day before we came to London, he overheard Giles swearing in a passion, and the Squire had pounced upon him with an

indignant inquiry if he thought swearing was the way to get to heaven. What he said about Jerry's Gazette caused Gavity's eyes to grow round with wonder.

"Lord love ye!" said Gavity, "Jerry's Gazette a thing that wants putting down! Why, it is the blessedest of institutions to us city men. It is a public Benefactor. The commercial world has had no boon like it. Did you know the service it does, you'd sing its praises, sir, instead of abusing it."

"How dare you tell me so to my face?" demanded the Squire.

"Jerry's Gazette's like a mine of gold, sir. It is making its fortune. A fine one, too."

"I shouldn't like to make a fortune out of my neighbour's tears, and blood, and homes, and hearths," was the wrathful answer. "If Pyefinch Blair dies in this illness, will Jerry's Gazette settle a pension from its riches on his widow and children? Answer me that Mr. Gavity."

Mr. Gavity, to judge by his looks, thought the question nearly as unreasonable as he thought the Squire. He wanted to tell of the vast benefit Jerry's Gazette had proved in certain cases; but the Squire stopped his ears, saying Blair's case was enough for him.

"I do not deny that the Gazette may work mischief once in a way," acknowledged Mr. Gavity. "It is but a solitary instance, sir;

and in all commercial improvements the units must suffer for the mass."

No good. The Squire went at him again, hammer and tongs, and at last dashed away without saying good morning, calling out to me to come on, and stop not a moment longer in a nest of thieves and casuists.

Difford's Buildings had us in the afternoon. The baby was in its basket, little Joe lay asleep before the fire, the doll against his cheek, and Mary was kneeling by the bed in the back room. She got up hastily when she saw us.

"I think he is weaker," she said in a whisper, as she came through the door and pushed it to. "There is a look on his face that I do not like."

There was a look on hers. A wan, haggard, patiently hopeless look, that seemed to say she could struggle no longer. It was not natural; neither was the calm, dead tone.

"Stay here a bit, my dear, and rest yourself," said the Squire to her. "I'll go in and sit with him."

There could be no mistake now. Death was in every line of his face. His head was a little raised on the pillow; and the hollow eyes tried to smile a greeting. The Squire was good for a great deal, but not for making believe with that sight before him. He broke down with a great sob.

"Don't grieve for me," murmured poor Blair.

“ Hard though it seems to leave her, I have learnt to say, ‘ God’s will be done.’ It is all for the best—oh, it is all for the best. We must through much tribulation enter into the Kingdom.”

And then *I* broke down, and hid my face on the counterpane. Poor old Blair! And we boys had called him Baked Pie!

I went to Paddington station to meet the train. Hannah was in it, and came bursting out upon me with a shriek that might have been heard at Oxford. Upon the receipt of the telegram, she and Mrs. Todhetley came to the conclusion that I had been run over, and was lying in some hospital with my legs off. That was through the Squire’s wording of the message; he would not let me write it. “Send Hannah to London to-morrow by mid-day train, to nurse somebody that’s in danger.”

Blair lingered three days yet before he died, sensible to the last, and quite happy. Not a care or anxiety on his mind about what had so troubled him all along—the wife and children.

“ Through God’s mercy; He knows how to soothe the death-bed,” said Mr. Lockett.

Whether Mary would have to go home to Wales with her babies, or stay and do what she could for them in London, depending on the wool-work, the clergyman said he did not know, when talking to us at the hotel. He supposed it must be one of the two.

"We'll have them down at the Manor, and fatten 'em up a bit, Johnny," spoke the Squire, a rueful look on his good old face. "Mercy light upon us!—and all through Jerry's Gazette!"

I must say a word for myself. Jerry's Gazette (if there is such a thing still in existence) may be, as Mr. Gavity expressed it to us then, the "blessedest of institutions to him and commercial men." I don't wish to deny it, and I could not if I wished; for except in this one instance (which may have been an exceptional case, as Gavity insisted) I know nothing of it or its working. But I declare on my honour I have told nothing but the truth in regard to what it did for the schoolmaster, Pyefinch Blair.

XIII.

SOPHIE CHALK.

THE horses went spanking along the frosty road, the Squire driving, his red comforter wrapped round his neck. Mrs. Todhetley sat beside him ; Tod and I behind. It was one of the jolliest days that early January ever gave us ; dark blue sky, and icicles on the trees : a day to tempt people out. Mrs. Todhetley, getting to her work after breakfast, said it was a shame to stay indoors : and it was hastily decided to drive over to the Whitneys' place and see them. So the large phaeton was brought round.

I had not expected to go. When there was a probability of their staying anywhere sufficiently long for the horses to be put up, Giles was generally taken : the Squire did not like to give trouble to other people's servants. It would not matter at the Whitneys' : they had a host of them.

"I don't know that I care about going," said Tod, as we stood outside, waiting for the others, Giles at the horses' heads.

"Not care, Tod ! Anna's at home."

He flicked his glove at my face for the impudence. We laughed at him about Anna Whitney sometimes. They were great friends. The Squire, hearing some nonsense one day, took it seriously, and told Tod it would be time enough for him to get thinking about sweethearts when he was out of leading-strings. Which of course Tod did not like.

It was a long drive; I can tell you that. And as we turned in at the wide gravel sweep that led up to the house, we saw their family coach being brought round with some luggage on it, the postilion in his undress jacket, just laced on the seams with crimson. The Whitneys never drove from the box.

Whitney Hall was a long red-brick house with a good many windows and wide circular steps leading to the door, its park and grounds lying around it. Anna came running to meet us as we went in, dressed for a journey. She was seventeen; very fair; with a gentle face, and smooth, bright, dark auburn hair; one of the sweetest girls you could see on a sunshiny day. Tod was the first to shake hands with her, and I saw her cheeks blush crimson as Sir John's state liveries.

"You are going out, my dear," said Mrs. Todhetley.

"Oh, yes," she answered, the tears rising in her blue eyes, which were as blue as the dark blue sky. "We have had bad news. William——"

The dining-room door across the hall opened and a lot of them came forth. Lady Whitney in a plaid shawl and the strings of her bonnet untied ; Miss Whitney (Helen), Harry, and some of the young ones behind. Anna's quiet voice was drowned, for they all began to tell of it together.

Sir John and William were staying at some friend's house at Ombersley. Lady Whitney thought they would have been home as this day : instead of which the morning's post had brought a letter to say that an accident had occurred to William in hunting : some muff who couldn't ride had gone swerving right against Bill's horse, and he was thrown. Except that Bill was insensible, nothing further of the damage could be gathered from the letter ; for Sir John, if put out, could write no more intelligibly than the Squire. The chief of what he said was—that they were to come off at once.

"We are going, of course ; I with the two girls and Harry ; the carriage is waiting to take us to the station," said poor Lady Whitney, her bonnet pushed off till it hung by one ear. "But I do wish John had explained further : it is such suspense. We don't think it can be extremely serious, or there would have been a telegram. I'm sure I have shivered at every ring that has come to the door this morning."

"And the post was never in, as usual, until

nearly ten o'clock," complained Harry. "I wonder my father puts up with it."

"And the worst is that we had a visitor coming to day," added Helen. "Mamma would have telegraphed to London for her not to start, but there was not time. It's Sophie Chalk."

"Who is Sophie Chalk?" asked Tod.

Helen told us, while Lady Whitney was finding places for everybody at the table. They had been taking luncheon in a scrambling fashion ; sitting or standing : cold beef, mince-pies, and cheese.

"Sophie Chalk was a schoolfellow of mine," said Helen. "It was an old promise—that she should come to visit us. Different things have caused it to be put off, but we have kept up a correspondence. At length I got mamma to say that she might come as soon as Christmas was turned ; and to-day was fixed. We don't know what on earth to do."

"Let her come to us until you see how things turn out," cried the Squire, in his hearty good-nature, as he cut himself a slice of beef. "We can take her home in the carriage : one of these boys can ride back if you'll lend him a horse."

Mrs. Todhetley said he took the same words out of her mouth. The Whitneys were too flurried to pretend to make ceremony, and very glad to accept the offer. But I don't think it would ever have been made had the

Squire and madam known what was to come of it.

“There will be her luggage,” observed Anna ; who usually remembered things for everybody. And Lady Whitney put down the mince-pie she was eating, and looked round in consternation.

“It must come to us by rail ; we will send for it from the station,” decided Tod, always ready at a pinch. “What sort of a damsel is this Sophie Chalk, Anna ?”

“I never saw her,” replied Anna. “You must ask Helen.”

Tod whispered something to Anna that made her smile and blush. “I’ll write you my sentiments about her to Ombersley,” he said aloud. “Those London girls are something to look at.” And I knew by Tod’s tone that he was prepared *not* to like Miss Sophie Chalk.

We saw them out to the carriage ; the Squire putting in my lady ; Tod, Helen and Anna. One of the housemaids, Lettice Lane, was running in and out wildly, bringing things to the carriage. She had lived with us once ; but Hannah’s temper and Letty’s propensity to gossip did not get on together. Mrs. Todhetley, when they had driven away, asked her how she liked her place—which she had entered at Michaelmas. Oh, pretty well, Lettice answered : but for her old mother, she should emigrate to Australia. She used to be always saying that

at Dyke Manor, and it was one of the things that Hannah would not put up with, telling her decent girls could find work at home.

Tod went off next, on horseback : and, before three, we drove to the station to meet the London train. The Squire stayed in the carriage, sending me and Mrs. Todhetley on to the platform.

Two passengers got out at the small station ; a little lady in feathers, and a butcher in a blue frock, who had a calf in the open van. Mrs. Todhetley stepped up to the lady and enquired whether she was Miss Chalk.

“ I am Miss Chalk. Have I the honour of speaking to Lady Whitney ? ”

While matters were being explained, I stood observing her. A very small, slight person, with pretty features white as ivory ; and wide-open light blue eyes, that were too close together, and had a touch of boldness on their surface. It would take a great deal to daunt their owner, if I could read countenances : and that I was always doing it was no fault of mine, for the instinct, strong and irrepressible, lay within me—as old Duffham once said. I did not like her voice, it had no true ring in it ; I did not much like her face. But the world in general no doubt found her charming, and the Squire thought her so.

She sat in front with him, a carpet-bag between them : and I, behind, had a great black

box filling up my legs. She could not do without that much of her luggage: the rest might come by rail.

“Johnny,” whispered Mrs. Todhetley to me, “I am afraid she is very grand and fashionable. I don’t know how we shall manage to amuse her. Do you like her?”

“Well—she has got a stunning lot of hair.”

“Beautiful hair, Johnny!”

With the hair close before us, I could but say so. It was brown; rather darker than Anna Whitney’s, but with a red tinge upon it, and about double in quantity. Nature or oil was giving it a wonderful gloss in the light of the setting sun, as she turned her head about, laughing and talking with the Squire. Her dress was some bright purple stuff trimmed with white fur; her hands, lying in repose on her lap, had yellow gauntlets on.

“I’m glad I ordered a duck for dinner, in addition to the boiled veal and bacon, Johnny,” whispered Mrs. Todhetley again. “The fish won’t be much: it is only the cold cod done up in parsley sauce.”

Tod, at home long before, was at the door ready for us when we got up. I saw her eyes staring at him in the dusk.

“Who was the gentleman that handed me out?” she asked me as we went in.

“Mr. Todhetley’s son.”

“I—think—I have heard Helen Whitney

talk of him," she said in reflection. "He will be very rich, will he not?"

"Pretty well. He will have what his father has before him, Miss Chalk."

Mrs. Todhetley offered tea, but she said she would prefer a glass of wine; and went up to her chamber after taking it. Hannah and the housemaid were putting one hastily in order for her. Sleepy with the frosty air, I was nodding over the fire in the drawing-room when the rustle of silk awoke me.

It was Miss Chalk. She came in like a gleaming fairy, her dress shining in the fire-light; for they had not been in to light the candles. It had a bright green-and-gold tinge, and was cut very low. Did she think we had a party?—or that dressing for dinner was the fashion in our plain country house—as it might have been at a duke's? Her shoulders and arms were white as snow; she wore a silver necklace, the like of which I never saw before, silver bracelets, and a thick cord of silver twisting in and out of the complications of her hair.

"I'm sure it is very kind of your people to take me in," she said, standing still on the hearth-rug in her beauty. "They have lighted a fire in my room; it is so comfortable. I do like a country house. At Lady Augustus Difford's——"

Her head went round at the opening of the

door. It was Tod. She stepped timidly towards him, like a school-girl : dressed as now, she looked no older than one. Tod might have made up his mind not to like her ; but he had to surrender. Holding out her hand to him, he could but yield to the attractive vision, and his heart shone in his eyes as he bent them upon her.

“ I beg your pardon for having passed you without notice ; I did not even thank you for lifting me down ; but I was frozen with the cold drive,” she said, in a low tone. “ Will you forgive me, Mr. Todhetley ? ”

Forgive her ! as Tod stood there with her hand in his, he looked inclined to eat her. Forgiveness was not enough. He led her to the fire, speaking softly some words of gallantry.

“ Helen Whitney has often talked to me about you, Mr. Todhetley. I little thought I should ever make your acquaintance ; still less, be staying in your father’s house.”

“ And I as little dreamt of the good fortune that was in store for me,” answered Tod.

He was a tall, fine young fellow then, rising twenty, looking older than his age ; she (as she looked to-night) a delicate, beautiful fairy, of any teens fancy might please to picture. As Tod stood over her, his manner took a gentle air, his eyes a shy light—quite entirely unusual with him. She did not look up, save by a modest glance now and again, dropping her

eyes when they met his own. He had the chance to take out his fill of gazing, and used it.

Tod was caught. From that very first night that his eyes fell on Sophie Chalk, his heart went out to her. Anna Whitney! What child's-play had the joking about her been to this! Anna might have been his sister, for all the regard he had for her of a certain sort; and he knew it now.

A looker-on sees more than a player, and I did not like one thing—she drew him on to love her. If ever a girl spread a net to entangle a man's unconscious feet, that girl was Sophie Chalk. She went about it artistically, too; in the sweetest, most natural way imaginable; and Tod did not see or suspect mortal atom of it. No fellow in a similar case ever does. If their heart's not engaged, their vanity is; and it blinds them utterly. I said a word or two to him, and nearly got knocked over for my pains. At the fortnight's end—and she was with us nearly that length of time—Tod's heart had made its choice for weal or for woe.

She took care that it should be so; she did, though he cut my head off now for saying it. You shall judge. On that first night when she came down in her gleaming silk, with the silver on her neck and hair, she began. In the

drawing-room, after dinner, she sat by him on the sofa, talking in a low voice, her face turned to him, lifting her eyes and dropping them again. My belief is, she must have been to a school where they taught eye-play. Tod thought it was sweet, natural, modest shyness. I thought it was all artistic. Mrs. Todhetley was called from the room on domestic matters; the Squire, gone to sleep in his dinner-chair, had not come in. After tea, when all were present, she went to the piano, which nobody ever opened but me, and played and sang, keeping Tod by her side to turn the music, and to talk to her at available moments. In point of execution, her singing was perfect, but the voice was a rather harsh one—not a note of real melody in it. After breakfast the next morning, when we were away together, she came to us in her jaunty hat, all feathers, and purple dress with its white fur. She lured him off to show her the dyke and goodness knows what else, leaving Lena, who had come out with her, to be taken home by me. In the afternoon Tod drove her out in the pony-chaise; they had settled the drive between them down by the dyke, and I know she had contrived for it, just as surely as though I had been behind the hedge listening. I don't say Tod was loth; it was quite the other thing from the first. They took a two-hours' drive, coming home at dusk; and then she laughed and talked with

him and me round the fire until it was time to get ready for dinner. That second evening she came down in a gauzy sort of dress, with a thin white body. Mrs. Todhetley thought she would be cold, but she said she was used to it. And so it went on ; never were they apart for an hour—no, nor scarcely for a minute in the day.

At first Mr. and Mrs. Todhetley saw nothing. Rather were they glad Tod should be so attentive to a stranger ; for special politeness had not previously been amid Tod's virtues ; but they could but notice as the thing went on. Mrs. Todhetley grew to have an uneasy look in her eyes, and one day the Squire spoke out. Sophie Chalk had tied a pink woollen scarf over her head to go out with Tod to see the rabbits fed : he ran back for something, and the Squire caught his arm.

“Don't carry that on too far, Joe. You don't know who the girl is.”

“What nonsense, sir !” returned Tod, with a ready laugh ; but he turned the colour of a peony.

We did not know much about her, except that she seemed to be on the high ropes, talking a good deal of great people, and of Lord and Lady Augustus Difford, with whom she had been staying for two months before Christmas. Her home in London, she said, was at her sister's, who had married a wealthy merchant,

and lived fashionably in Torriana Square. Mrs. Todhetley did not like to appear inquisitive, and would not question. Miss Chalk was with us as the Whitneys' friend, and that was sufficient.

Bill Whitney's hurt turned out to be something complicated in the ribs. There was no danger after the first week, and they returned home during the second, bringing Bill with them. Helen Whitney wrote the same day for Sophie Chalk, and she said that her mamma would be happy also to see Tod and me for a short while.

We went over in the large phaeton, Tod driving, with Miss Chalk beside him; I and Dwarf Giles behind. She had thanked Mrs. Todhetley in the prettiest manner; she told the Squire, as he handed her into the carriage, that she should never forget his kindness, and hoped some time to find an opportunity of repaying it.

Such kissing between Helen and Sophie Chalk! I thought they'd never leave off. Anna stood by Tod, while he looked on: a hungry light in his eyes, as if envying Helen the kisses she took. He had no eyes now for Anna. Lady Whitney asked if we would go upstairs to William: he was impatient to see us both.

“ Halloa, old Johnny! ”

He was lying on his back on a broad flat sofa, looking just as well as ever in the face.

They had given him up the best bedroom and dressing-room because he was ill : nice rooms, both—with the door open between.

“ How did it happen, Bill ? ”

“ Goodness knows ! Some fellow rode his horse pretty near over mine—don’t believe he had ever been across anything but a donkey before. Where’s Tod ? ”

“ Somewhere.—I thought he was close behind me.”

“ I’m so glad you two have come. It’s awfully dull, lying here all day.”

“ Are you obliged to lie ? ”

“ Carden says so.”

“ Do you have Carden ? ”

“ As if our folks would be satisfied without him when it’s a surgical case, and one of danger ! He was telegraphed for on the spot, and got over in less than an hour. It happened near the Ombersley station. He comes here every other day, and Featherston between whiles as his locum tenens.”

Tod burst in with a laugh. He had been talking to the girls in the gallery outside. Leaving him and Bill Whitney to have out their own chaffer, I went through the door to the other room—the fire there was the largest.

“ How do you do, sir ? ”

Somebody in a neat brown gown and close white cap, sewing at a table behind the door, had got up to say this with a courtesy. Where

had I seen her?—a woman of three or four and thirty, with a delicate, meek face, and subdued expression. She saw the puzzle.

“I am Harry Lease’s widow, sir. He was pointsman at South Crabb.”

Why, yes, to be sure! And she was not much altered either. But it was a good while now since he died, and she and the children had moved away at the time. I shook hands: the sight of her brought poor Harry Lease to my mind—and many other things.

“Are you living here?”

“I have been nursing young Mr. Whitney, sir. Mr. Carden sent me over from Worcester to the place where he was lying; and my lady thought I might as well come on here with them for a bit, though he don’t want more done for him now than a servant could do. What a deal you have grown, sir!”

“Have I? You should see Joseph Todhety. You knew me, though, Mrs. Lease?”

“I remembered your voice, sir. Besides, I heard Miss Anna say that you were coming here.”

Asking after Polly, she gave me the family history since Lease’s death. First of all, after moving to her mother’s at Worcester, she tried to get a living at making gloves. Her two youngest children caught some disorder, and died; and then she took to go out nursing. In that she succeeded so well—for it seemed

to be her vocation, she said—as to be brought under the notice of some of the medical gentlemen of the town. They gave her plenty to do, and she earned an excellent living, Polly and the other two being cared for by the grandmother.

“After the scuffle, and toil, and sorrow of the old days, nursing seems like a holiday for me, Master Ludlow,” she concluded; “and I am at home with the children for a day or two as often as I can be.”

“Johnny!”

The call was Bill Whitney’s, and I went into the other room. Helen was there, but not Tod. She and Bill were disputing.

“I tell you, William, I shall bring her in. She has asked to come. You can’t think how nice she is.”

“And I tell you, Helen, that I won’t have her brought in. What do I want with your Sophie Chalks?”

“It will be your loss.”

“So be it! I can’t do with strange girls here.”

“You will see that.”

“Now look here, Helen—I won’t have it. To-morrow is Mr. Carden’s day for coming, and I’ll tell him that I can’t be left in peace. He will soon give you a word of a sort.”

“Oh, well, if you are so serious as that, let it drop,” returned Helen, with good-humour.

“ I only thought to give you pleasure—and Sophie Chalk did ask to come in.”

“ Who *is* this Sophie Chalk? That’s about the nineteenth time I have asked it.”

“ The sweetest girl in the world.”

“ Let that go. Who *is* she?”

“ I went to school with her at Miss Lakon’s. She used to do my French for me, and touch up my drawings. We vowed a lasting friendship, and I am not going to forget it. Everybody loves her. Lord and Lady Augustus Difford have just had her staying with them for two months.”

“ Good souls! ” cried Bill, satirically.

“ She is the loveliest fairy in the world, and dresses like an angel. Will you see her now, William? ”

“ No.”

Helen went off with a flounce. Bill was half laughing, half peevish over it. The confinement made him fretful.

“ As if I’d let them bring a parcel of girls in to bother me! You’ve had her for these past three weeks, I hear, Johnny.”

“ Pretty near it.”

“ Do you like her? ”

“ Tod does.”

“ What sort of a creature is the syren? ”

“ She’d fascinate the hair off your head, Bill; give her the chance.”

“ Then I’ll be shot if she shall get the chance

as far as mine goes ! Lease ! "—raising his voice—"keep all strange ladies out here. If they attempt to enter, tell them we've got rats."

"Very well, sir."

Other visitors were staying in the house. A Miss Deveen, and her companion Miss Cattledon. We saw them first at dinner. Miss Deveen sat by Sir John—an ancient lady, active and upright, with a keen, pleasant face and white hair. She had on a shirt-front of worked muslin, with three emerald studs in it that glittered more than diamonds. They looked beautiful. After dinner, when those four old ones began whist, and we were at the other end of the drawing-room in a group, somebody spoke of the studs.

"They are nothing compared to some of her jewellery," said Helen Whitney. "She has a whole set of diamonds, most beautiful ! I hardly know what they are worth."

"But those emeralds which she has on to-night must be of value," cried Sophie Chalk. "See how they sparkle !"

It made us all turn. As Miss Deveen stirred with the movement of throwing down her cards, the rays from the wax-lights shone on the emeralds, bringing out the purest green ever imagined by a painter.

"I should like to steal them," said Sophie Chalk ; "they'd look well on me."

It made us laugh. Tod had his eyes fixed

on her, a strange love lying in their depths. Anna Whitney, kneeling on the ground behind me, could see it.

"I would rather steal a set of pink topaz studs that she has," spoke Helen; "and the opals, too. Miss Deveen is great in studs."

"Why in studs?"

"Because she always wears this kind of white body; it is her evening dress, with satin skirts. I know she has a different set of studs for every day in the week."

"Who is she?" asked Sophie Chalk.

"A cousin of mamma's. She has a great deal of money, and no one in particular to leave it to. Harry says he hopes she'll remember, in making her will, that he is only a poor younger son."

"Just you shut up, Helen," interrupted Harry, in a whisper. "I believe that companion has got ears behind her head."

Miss Cattledon glanced round from the whist-table, as though the ears were there and wide open. She was a wiry lady of middle age, quite forty, with a screwed-in waist and creaking stays, a piece of crimson velvet round her long thin neck, and scanty hair as light as ginger.

"It is she that has charge of the jewel-box," spoke Helen, when we thought it safe to begin again. "Miss Deveen is a wonderful old lady for sixty; she has come here without a maid this time, and dresses herself. I don't see what use Miss Cattledon's of to her, unless it

is to act as a general refrigerator, but she gets a hundred a year salary and some of the old satins. Sophie, I'm sure she heard what we said—that we should like to steal the trinkets."

"Hope she relished it!" quoth Harry. "She'll put them under double lock and key, for fear we should break in."

It was all jesting nonsense. Amid the subdued laugh, Tod bent his face over Sophie Chalk, his hand touching the lace on her sleeve. She had on blue to-night with a pearl necklace.

"Will you sing that song for me, Miss Chalk?"

She rose and took his arm. Helen jumped up and arrested them ere they reached the piano.

"We must not have any music just now. Papa never likes it when they are at whist."

"How very unreasonable of him!" cried Tod, looking fiercely at Sir John's old red nose and steel spectacles.

"Of course it is," agreed Helen. "If he played for guinea stakes instead of sixpenny, he could not be more particular about having no noise. Let us go into the study: we can do as we like there."

We all trooped off. It was a small square room with a shabby carpet and worn horse-hair chairs. Helen stirred up the fire; and Sophie sat down on a low stool and said she'd tell us a fairy tale.

We had been there just a week when it came out. The week was good. Long walks in the frosty air ; a huge swing between the cedar trees ; riding by turns on the rough Welsh pony for fun ; bagatelle indoors, work, music, chatter ; one dinner-party, and a small dance. Half my time was spent in Bill's room. Tod seemed to find but little leisure to come up ; or for anything else, except Sophie Chalk. It was a gone case with Tod : looking on, I could see that ; but I don't think anybody else did, except Anna. He liked Sophie too well to make it conspicuous. Harry made open love to her ; Sir John said she was the prettiest little lady he had seen for many a day. I daresay Tod told her the same in private.

And she ? Well, I don't know what to say. That she kept Tod at her side, quietly fascinating him always, was certain ; but her liking for him did not appear real. To me it seemed that she was *acting* it. "I can't make that Sophie Chalk out, Tod," I said to him one day by the beeches : "she seems childishly genuine, but I believe she's just as sharp as a needle." Tod laughed idly, and told me I was the simplest muff that ever trod in shoe-leather. She was no rider, and somebody had to walk by her side when she sat on the Welsh pony, holding her on at all the turnings. It was generally Tod : she made believe to be frightfully timid with *him*.

It was at the week's end the loss was discovered: Miss Deveen's emerald studs were gone. You never heard such a commotion. She, the owner, took it quietly, but Miss Cattledon made noise enough for ten. The girls were talking round the study fire the morning after the dance and I was writing a note at the table, when Lettice Lane came in, her face white as death.

"I beg your pardon, young ladies, for asking, but have any of you seen Miss Deveen's emerald studs, please?"

They turned round in surprise.

"Miss Deveen's studs!" exclaimed Helen. "We are not likely to have seen them, Lettice. Why do you ask?"

"Because, Miss Helen, they are gone—that is, Miss Cattledon says they are. But, with so much jewels as there is in that case, it is very easy to overlook two or three little things."

Why Lettice Lane should have shaken all over in telling this, was an unexplained marvel. Her very teeth chattered. Anna enquired; but all the answer given by the girl was, that it had "put her into a twitter." Sophie Chalk's countenance was full of compassion, and I liked her for it.

"Don't let it trouble you, Lettice," she kindly said. "If the studs are missing, I dare say they will be found. Just before I came down here my sister lost a brooch from her dressing-table.

The whole house was searched for it, the servants were uncomfortable——”

“And was it found, miss,” interrupted Lettice, too eager to let her finish.

“Of course it was found. Jewels don’t get hopelessly lost in gentlemen’s houses. It had fallen down; and, caught by the lace of the toilette drapery, was lying hid within its folds.”

“Oh, thank you, miss; yes, perhaps the studs have fallen too,” said Lettice Lane as she went out. Helen looked after her in some curiosity.

“Why should the loss trouble *her*? Lettice has nothing to do with Miss Deveen’s jewels.”

“Look here, Helen, I wish we had never said we should like to steal the things,” spoke Sophie Chalk. “It was all jest, of course, but this would not be a nice sequel to it.”

“Why—yes—you did say it, some of you,” cried Anna, who, till then, had seemed buried in thought; and her face flushed.

“What if we did?” retorted Helen, looking at her in some slight surprise.

Soon after this, in going up to Bill’s room, I met Lettice Lane. She was running down stairs with a plate, and looked whiter than ever.

“Are the studs found, Lettice?”

“No, sir.”

The answer was short, the manner scared. Helen had wondered why the loss should affect her; and so did I.

"Where's the use of your being put out over it, Lettice? You did not take them."

"No, Master Johnny, I did not; but—but—" looking all round and dropping her voice to a whisper, "I am afraid I know who did; and it was through me. I'm a'most mad."

This was rather mysterious. She gave no opportunity for more, but ran down as though the stairs were on fire.

I went on to Bill's chamber, and found Tod and Harry with him: they were laughing over a letter from some fellow at Oxford. Standing at the window close by the inner door, which was ajar, I heard Lettice Lane go into the dressing-room and speak to Mrs. Lease in a half whisper.

"I can't bear this any longer," she said. "If you have taken those studs, for heaven's sake put them back. I'll make some excuse—say I found them under the carpet, or slipped under the drawers—anything—only put them back!"

"I don't know what you mean," replied Mrs. Lease, who always spoke as though she had but half a voice.

"Yes, you do. You have got the studs."

By the pause that ensued, Nurse Lease seemed to have lost the use of her tongue. Lettice took the opportunity to put it stronger.

"If you've got them about you, give them into my hand now, and I'll manage the rest.

Not a living soul shall ever know of this if you will. Oh, do give them to me ! ”

Mrs. Lease spoke then. “ If you say this again, Lettice Lane, I’ll tell my lady all. And indeed, I have been wanting to tell her ever since I heard that something was gone. It was for your sake I did not.”

“ For my sake ! ” shrieked Lettice.

“ Well, and it was. I’m sure I’d not like to say it if I could help, Lettice Lane ; but it did strike me that you might have been tempted to—to—you know.”

So it was accusation and counter-accusation. Which of the two confessed first was uncertain ; but in a short while the whole was known to the house, and to Lady Whitney.

On the previous night the upper housemaid was in bed with some temporary illness, and it fell to Lettice Lane to put the rooms to rights after the ladies had dressed. Instead of calling one of the other servants she asked Mrs. Lease to help her—which must have been for nothing but to gossip with the nurse, as Lady Whitney said. On Miss Deveen’s dressing-table stood her case of jewels, the key in the lock. Lettice lifted the lid. On the top tray glittered a heap of ornaments, and the two women feasted their eyes with the sight. Nurse Lease declared that she never put “ a finger’s end ” on a single article. Lettice could not say as much. Neither (if they were to be believed) had observed

the green studs ; and the upper tray was not lifted to see what was underneath. Miss Cattledon, who made one at the uproar, put in her word at this, to say they were telling a falsehood, and her face had enough vinegar in it to pickle a salmon. Other people might like Miss Cattledon, but I did not. She was in a silent rage with Miss Deveen for having chosen to keep the jewel-case during their stay at Whitney Hall, and for carelessly leaving the key in it. Miss Deveen took the loss calmly, and was as cool as a water-melon.

“ I don’t know that the emerald studs were in the upper tray last night ; I don’t remember to have seen them,” Miss Deveen said, as if bearing out the assertion of the two women.

“ Begging your pardon, madam, they *were* there,” stiffly corrected Miss Cattledon. “ I saw them. I thought you would put them on, as you were going to wear your green satin gown, and asked if I should lay them out ; but you told me you would choose for yourself.”

Miss Deveen had worn diamonds ; we noticed their lustre.

“ I’m sure it is a dreadful thing to have happened ! ” said poor Lady Whitney, looking as flurried as a scared cow. “ I dare not tell Sir John ; he would storm the windows out of their frames. Lease, I am astonished at *you*. How could you dare open the box ? ”

“ I never did open it, my lady,” was the

answer. "When I got round from the bed, Lettice was standing with it open before her."

"I don't think there need be much doubt as to the guilty party," struck in Miss Cattledon with intense acrimony, as her eyes went swooping down upon Lettice. And if they were not sly and crafty eyes, never you trust me again.

"I do not think there need be so much trouble," corrected Miss Deveen. "It's not your loss, Cattledon—it is mine: and my own fault too."

But Miss Cattledon would not take the hint. She stuck to it like a leech, and sifted evidence as subtly as an Old Bailey lawyer. Mrs. Lease carried innocence on the surface; no one could doubt it: Lettice might have been taken for a seven-years' thief. She sobbed, and choked, and rambled in her tale, and grew as confused as a hunted hare, contradicting herself at every second word. The Australian scheme (though it might have been nothing but foolish talk) told against her now.

Things grew more uncomfortable as the day went on, the house being ransacked from head to foot. Sophie Chalk cried. She was not rich, she said to me, but she'd give every shilling of money she had with her for the studs to be found; and she thought it was very wrong to accuse Lettice, when so many strangers had been in the house. I liked

Sophie better than I had liked her yet: she looked regularly vexed.

Sir John got to know of it: Miss Cattledon told him. He did not storm the windows out, but he said the police must come in to see Lettice Lane. Miss Deveen, hearing of this, went straight to Sir John, and assured him that if he took any serious steps while the affair was so doubtful, she would quit his house on the instant, and never put foot in it again. He retorted that it must have been Lettice Lane—common sense and Miss Cattledon could not be mistaken—and that it ought to be investigated.

They came to a compromise. Lettice was not to be given into custody at present; but she must quit the Hall. That, said Miss Deveen, was of course as Sir John and Lady Whitney pleased. To tell the truth, suspicion did seem strong against her.

She went away at eventide. One of the men was charged to drive her to her mother's, about five miles off. I and Anna, hastening home from our walk—for we had lost the others, and the stars were coming out in the cold sky—saw them as we passed the beeches. Lettice's face was swollen with crying.

“We are so sorry this has happened, Lettice,” Anna gently said, going to the gig. “I do hope it will be cleared up soon. Re-

member one thing—I shall think well of you until it is. *I do not suspect you.*”

“I am turned out like a criminal, Miss Anna,” sobbed the girl. “They searched me to the skin; that Miss Cattledon standing on to see that the housekeeper did it properly; and they have searched my boxes. The only one to speak a kind word to me as I came away, was Miss Deveen herself. It’s a disgrace I shall never get over.”

“That’s rubbish, Lettice, you know,”—for I thought I’d put in a good word, too. “You will soon forget it, once the right fellow is pitched upon. Good luck to you, Lettice.”

Anna shook hands with her, and the man drove on, Lettice sobbing aloud. Not hearing Anna’s footsteps, I looked round and saw she had sat down on one of the benches, though it was white with frost. I went back.

“Don’t you go and catch cold, Anna.”

“Johnny, you cannot think how this is troubling *me*.”

“Why you—in particular?”

“Well—for one thing I can’t believe that she is guilty. I have always liked Lettice.”

“So did we at Dyke Manor. But if she is not guilty, who is?”

“I don’t know, Johnny,” she continued, her eyes taking a far-off, thoughtful look. “What I cannot help thinking, is this—though I feel half ashamed to say it. Several visitors were

in the house last night; suppose one should have found her way into the room, and taken them? If so, how cruel this must be on Lettice Lane."

" Sophie Chalk suggested the same thing to me to-day. But a visitor would not do such a thing. Fancy a lady stealing jewels!"

" The open box might prove a strong temptation. People do things in such moments, Johnny, that they would fly from at other times."

" Sophie said that too. You have been talking together."

" I have not exchanged a word with Sophie Chalk on the subject. The ideas might occur naturally to any of us."

I did not think it at all likely to have been a visitor. How should a visitor know there was a jewel-box open in Miss Deveen's room? The chamber, too, was an inner one, and therefore not liable to be entered accidentally. To get to it you had to go through Miss Cattledon's.

" The room is not easy of access, you know, Anna."

" Not very. But it might be reached."

" I say, are you saying this for any reason?"

She turned round and looked at me rather sharply.

" Yes. Because I do not believe it was Lettice Lane."

"Was it Miss Cattledon herself, Anna? I have heard of such like curious things. Her eyes took a greedy look to-day when they rested on the jewels."

As if the suggestion frightened her—and I hardly know how I came to whisper it—Anna started up, and ran across the lawn to the house, never looking back or stopping.

XIV.

AT MISS DEVEEN'S.

THE end of the table was between us as we stood in the dining-room at Dyke Manor—I and Mrs. Todhetley—and on it lay a three-cornered article of soft geranium-coloured wool, which she called a “fichu.” I had my great-coat on my arm, ready for travelling, for I was going up to London on a visit to Miss Deveen.

It was Easter now. Soon after the break-up of pleasure, caused by the loss of the emerald studs at Whitney Hall in January, the party had dispersed. Sophie Chalk returned to London; Tod and I came home; Miss Deveen was going to Bath. The studs had not been traced—had never been heard of since; and Lettice Lane, after a short stay in disgrace at her mother’s cottage, had suddenly disappeared. Of course there were not wanting people to affirm that she had gone off to her favourite land of promise, Australia, carrying the studs with her.

The Whitneys were now in London. They did not go in for London seasons; in fact, Lady

Whitney hardly remembered to have had a season in London at all, and she quite dreaded this, saying she should feel like a fish out of water. Sir John occupied a bedroom when he went up for Parliament, and dined at his club. But Helen was nineteen, and they thought she ought to be presented to the Queen. So Miss Deveen was consulted about a furnished house for them, and she and Sir John took one for six weeks from just before Easter. They left Whitney Hall at once to take possession ; and Bill Whitney and Tod, who got an invitation, joined them the day before Good Friday.

The next Tuesday I received a letter from Miss Deveen. We were very good friends at Whitney, and she had been polite enough to say she should be glad to see me in London. I never expected to go, for three-parts of those invitations do not come to anything. She wrote now to ask me to go up ; it might be pleasant for me, she added, as Joseph Todhetley was staying with the Whitneys.

It is of no use going on until I have said a word about Tod. If ever a fellow was hopelessly in love with a girl, he was with Sophie Chalk. I don't mean hopeless as to the love, but as to getting out of it. On the day that we were quitting Whitney Hall—it was on the 26th of January, and the icicles were clustering on the tree-branches—they had taken a long walk together. What Tod said I don't know, but I think he let

her know how much he loved her, and asked her to wait until he should be of age and could put the question—would she be his wife? We went with her to the station, and the way Tod wrapped her up in the railway carriage was as good as a show. (Pretty little Mrs. Hughes, who had been visiting old Featherston, went up by the same train, and in the same carriage.) They corresponded a little, she and Tod. Nothing particular in her letters, at any rate—nothing but what the world might see, or that she might have written to Mrs. Todhetley, who got one from her on occasion—but I know Tod just lived on those letters and her remembrance; he could not hide it from me; and I saw without wishing to see or being able to help myself. Why, he had gone up to London now in one sole hope—that of meeting again with Miss Chalk!

Mrs. Todhetley saw it too—had seen it from the time when Sophie Chalk was at Dyke Manor—and it grieved and worried her. But not the Squire: he no more supposed Tod was going to take up seriously with Sophie Chalk, than with the pink-eyed lady exhibited the past year at Pershore Fair.

Well, that's all of explanation. This was Wednesday morning, and the Squire was going to drive me to the station for the London train. Mrs. Todhetley at the last moment was giving me charge of the fichu, which she had made for Sophie Chalk's sister.

"I did not send it by Joseph ; I thought it as well not," she observed, as she began to pack it up in the tissue paper. "Will you take it down to Mrs. Smith yourself, Johnny, and deliver it?"

"All right."

"I—you know, Johnny, I have the greatest dislike to anything that is mean or underhanded," she went on, dropping her voice a little. "But I do not think it would be wrong, under the circumstances, if I ask you to take a little notice of what these Smiths are. I don't mean in the way of being fashionable, Johnny ; I suppose they are all that ; but whether they are nice, good people. Somehow I did not like Miss Chalk, with all her fascinations, and it is of no use to pretend I did."

"She was too fascinating for ordinary folk, good mother."

"Yes, that was it. She seemed to put the fascinations on. And, Johnny, though we were to hear that she had a thousand a year to her fortune, I should be miserable if I thought Joe would choose her for his wife."

"She used to say she was poor."

"But she seemed to have a whole list of lords and ladies for her friends, so I conclude she and her connections must be people of note. It is not that, Johnny—rich or poor—it is that I don't like her for herself, and I do not think she is the one to make Joe happy. She never spoke

openly about her friends, you know, or about herself. At any rate, you take down this little parcel to Mrs. Smith, with my kind compliments, and then you'll see them for yourself. And in judgment and observation you are worth fifty of Joe, any day."

"Not in either judgment or observation; only in instinct."

"And that's for yourself," she added, slipping a sovereign into my pocket. "I don't know how much Mr. Todhetley has given you. Mind you spend your money in right things, Johnny. But I am not afraid; I could trust you all over the world."

Giles put my portmanteau in, and we drove off. The hedges were beginning to bud; the fields looked green. From observations about the young lambs, and a broken fence, that he went into a passion over, the Squire suddenly plunged into something else.

"You take care of yourself, sir, in London! Boys get into all kinds of pitfalls there, if they don't mind."

"But I do not call myself a boy, sir, now."

"Not call yourself a boy!" retorted the Squire, staring. "I'd like to know what else you are. Tod's a boy, sir, and nothing else, though he does count twenty years. I wonder what the world's coming to!" he added, lashing up Bob and Blister. "In my days, youngsters did not think themselves men before they had done growing."

“ What I meant was that I am old enough to take care of myself. Mrs. Todhetley has just said she could trust me all over the world.”

“ Just like her foolishness ! Take care you don’t get your pockets picked : there’s sure to be a thief at every corner. And don’t you pick them yourself, Master Johnny. I knew a young fellow once who went up to London with ten pounds in his pocket. He was staying at the Castle and Falcon hotel, near the place where the mails used to start from—and a fine sight it was to see them bowl out, one after another, with their lamps lighted. Well, Johnny, this young fellow got back again in four days by one of these very mails, every shilling spent, and his fare down not paid. You’d not think that was steady old Jacobson ; but it was.”

I laughed. The Squire looked more inclined to cry.

“ Cleaned out, he was ; not a rap left ! Money melts in London—that’s a fact—and it is very necessary to be cautious. *His* went in seeing the shows ; so he told his father. Don’t you go in for too many of them, Johnny, or you may find yourself without funds to bring you home, and railways don’t give trust. You might go to the Tower, now ; and St. Paul’s ; and the British Museum ; they are steady places. I’d not advise a theatre, unless it’s just once—some good, respectable play ; and mind you go home straight after it. Some young men slink

off to singing-shops now, they say, but I am sure such places can bring no good."

" Being with Miss Deveen, sir, I don't suppose I shall have the opportunity of getting into much 'harm.'"

" Well, it is right in me to caution you, Johnny. London is a dreadful place, full of sharpers and bad people. It used to be in the old days, and I don't suppose it has improved in these. You have no father, Johnny, and I stand to you in the light of one, to give you these warnings. Enjoy your visit rationally, my boy, and come home with a true report and a good conscience. That's the charge my old father always gave to me."

Miss Deveen lived in a nice house, north-westward, away from the bustle of London. The road was wide, the houses were semi-detached, with gardens around and plenty of trees in view. Somehow I had hoped Tod would be at the Paddington terminus, and was disappointed, so I took a cab and went on. Miss Deveen came into the hall to receive me, and said she did not consider me too big to be kissed, considering she was over sixty. Miss Cattledon, sitting in the drawing-room, gave me a finger to shake, and seemed not to like my coming. Her waist and throat were thinner and longer than ever ; her stays creaked like parchment.

If I'd never had a surprise in my life, I got one before I was in the house an hour. Coming

down from the bed-chamber to which they had shown me, a maid-servant passed me on the first-floor landing. It was Lettice Lane! I wondered—believe me or not, as you will—I wondered whether I saw straight, and stood back against the pillar of the banisters.

“ Why, Lettice, is it you ? ”

“ Yes, sir.”

“ But—what are you doing *here* ? ”

“ I am here in service, sir.”

She ran on upstairs. Lettice in Mrs. Deveen’s house ! It was worse than a Chinese puzzle.

“ Is that you, Johnny ? Step in here ? ”

The voice—Miss Deveen’s—came from a partially open door, close at hand. It was a small, pretty sitting-room, with light blue curtains and chairs. Miss Deveen sat by the fire, ready for dinner. In her white body shone studs of amethyst, quite as beautiful as the lost emeralds.

“ We call this the blue-room, Johnny. It is my own exclusively, and nobody enters it but upon invitation. Sit down. Were you surprised to see Lettice Lane ? ”

“ I don’t think I was ever so much surprised in all my life. She says she is living here.”

“ Yes; I sent for her to help my housemaid.”

I was thoroughly mystified. Miss Deveen put down her book and spectacles.

“ I have taken to glasses, Johnny.”

“ But I thought you saw so well.”

"So I do, for anything but very small type—and that book seems to have been printed for none but the youngest eyes. And I see people as well as things," she added significantly.

I felt sure of that.

"Do you remember, Johnny, the day after the uproar at Whitney Hall, that I asked you to pilot me to Lettice Lane's mother's, and to say nothing about it?"

"Yes, certainly. You walked the whole four miles of the way. It is five by road."

"And back again. I am good for more yet than some of the young folks are, Johnny; but I always was an excellent walker. Next day the party broke up; that pretty girl, Sophie Chalk, departed for London, and you and young Todhetley left later. When you reached your home in the evening, I don't suppose you thought I had been to Dyke Manor the same day."

"No! Had you really, Miss Deveen?"

"Really and truly. I'll tell you now the reason of those journeys of mine. As Lettice Lane was being turned out of the Hall, she made a remark in the moment of departure, accidentally I am sure, which caused me to be nearly certain she was not guilty of stealing the studs. Before, while they were all condemning her as guilty, I had felt doubtful of it; but of course I could not be sure, and Miss Cattledon reproaches me with thinking everybody innocent under every circumstance—which is a mistake

of hers. Mind, Johnny, the few words Lettice said might have been used designedly, by one crafty and guilty, on purpose to throw me off the suspicion: but I felt nearly fully persuaded that the girl had spoken them in unconscious innocence. I went to her mother's to see them both; I am fond of looking into things with my own eyes; and I came away with my good opinion increased. I went next to Mrs. Todhetley's to hear what she said of the girl; I saw her and your old nurse, Hannah, making it my request to both of them not to speak of my visit. They gave the girl a good character for honesty; Mrs. Todhetley thought her quite incapable of taking the studs; Hannah could not say what a foolish girl with roving ideas of Australia in her head might do in a moment of temptation. In less than a fortnight I was back in London, having paid my visit to Bath. I had been reflecting all that while, Johnny, on the cruel blight this must be on Lettice Lane, supposing that she was innocent. I thought the probabilities were that she *was* innocent, not guilty; and I determined to offer her a home in my own house during the uncertainty. She seemed only too glad to accept it, and here she is. If the girl should eventually turn out to be innocent, I shall have done her a real service; if guilty why I shall not regret having held out a helping hand to her, that may perhaps save her for the future."

"It was very kind and thoughtful of you, Miss Deveen!"

"My chief difficulty lay in keeping the suspicion on Lettice Lane a secret from my household. Fortunately I had taken no servants with me to Whitney Hall, my maid having been ill at the time; but Cattledon is outrageously virtuous, and of course proportionally bitter against Lettice. You saw that at Whitney."

"She would have been the first to tell of her."

"Yes. I had to put the thing rather strongly to Miss Cattledon—'Hold your tongue or leave me.' It answered, Johnny. Cattledon likes her place here, and acts accordingly. She picks up her petticoats from contamination when she meets the unfortunate Lettice; but she takes care to hold her tongue."

"Do you think it will ever be found out, Miss Deveen?"

"I hope it will."

"But who—could have taken them?" And the thought of what I had said to Anna Whitney, that it might be Miss Cattledon herself, flashed over me as I put the question.

"I think"—Miss Deveen glanced round as if to make sure we were alone, and dropped her voice a little—"that it must have been one of the guests who came to Whitney Hall that night. Cattledon let out one thing, but not until after we were at home, for the fact seemed not to have made the least impression on her memory

at the time ; but it came back afterwards. When she was quitting her room after dressing that evening—I being already out of mine and gone down—she saw the shawl she had worn in the afternoon lying across a chair just as she had thrown it off. She is very careful of her clothes ; and hesitated, she said, whether to go back then and fold it ; but, knowing she was late, did not do so. She had been downstairs about ten minutes, when I asked her to fetch my fan, which I had forgotten. Upon going through her room to mine, she saw the shawl lying on the floor, and picked it up, wondering how it could have come there. At that time the maids had not been in to put either her room or mine to rights. Now what I infer, Johnny, is that my jewel-case was visited and the studs were stolen *before* Lettice Lane and Mrs. Lease went near the rooms, and that the thief, in her hurry to escape, brushed against the shawl and threw it down.”

“ And cannot Miss Cattledon see the probability of that ? ”

“ She will not see it. Lettice Lane is guilty, with her, and nobody else. Prejudice goes a long way in this world, Johnny. The people who came to the dance that night were taking off their things in the next room to Miss Cattledon’s, and I think it likely that some one of them may have found a way into my chamber, perhaps even by accident, and the sight of the

brilliant emerald studs—they were more beautiful than any they were lying with—was too much for human equanimity. It was my fault for leaving the dressing-case open—and do you know, Johnny, I believe I left it literally *open*—I can never forget that."

"But Lettice Lane said it was shut; shut but not locked."

"Well, it is upon my conscience that I left it open. Whoever took the studs may have shut down the lid, in precaution or forgetfulness. Meanwhile, Johnny, don't you say anything of what I have told you; at the Whitneys' or elsewhere. They do not know that Lettice Lane is with me; they are prejudiced against her, especially Sir John; and Lettice has orders to keep out of the way of visitors. Should they by chance see her, why, I shall say that as the case was at best doubtful, I am giving the girl a chance to redeem her good name. We are going there after dinner. So mind you keep counsel."

"To the Whitneys?"

"It is only next door, as you may say. I did not mention that you were coming up," she added, "so there will be a surprise for them. And now we will go down. Here, carry my book for me, Johnny."

In the drawing-room we found a grey-haired curate, with a mild voice; Miss Cattledon was simpering and smiling upon him. I gathered that he did duty in the church hard by, and

had come to dinner by invitation. He took in Miss Deveen, and that other blessed lady fell to me. It was a good dinner,—Miss Deveen carving: uncommonly good to me after my journey. Didn't Miss Deveen make me eat ! She said she knew what boys' appetites were. After the salmon, before I'd finished one joint she put on my plate another ; first a leg and a merry-thought, then a wing and some bones, besides the stuffing and tongue. The curate took his leave, but Miss Deveen sat on ; she fancied to have heard that the Whitneys were to have friends to dinner that night, and would not go in too early.

About half a dozen houses lay between, and Miss Deveen put a shawl over her head and ran the distance. "Such a mistake, to have taken a place for them so near Hyde Park !" whispered Cattledon as we were following—and I'm sure she must have been in a gracious mood to give me the confidence. "Neither Sir John nor Miss Deveen has much notion of the requirements of fashionable society, Mr. Ludlow : as to poor Lady Whitney, she is a very owl in all that relates to it."

Poor Lady Whitney—not looking like an owl, but a plain good-hearted English mother—was the first to see us. There was no dinner party after all. She sat on a chair just inside the drawing-room, which was precisely the same in build and size as Miss Deveen's, but had not,

her handsome furniture. She said she was glad to see me, and would have invited me with Joe, but for want of beds.

They were all grouped at the other end of the room, playing at forfeits, and a vast deal too busy to notice me. I had leisure to look at them. Helen was talking very fast: Harry shouting; Anna sat leaning her cheek on her hand; Tod stood frowning and angry against the wall; the young ones were jumping about like savages; and Bill Whitney was stuck on a stool, his eyes bandaged, and the tips of a girl's white fingers touching his hands. A fairy, rather than a girl, for that's what she looked like, with her small, light figure and her gauze skirts floating: Miss Sophie Chalk.

But what on earth had come to her hair? It used to be brown; it was now light, and gleaming with golden spangles. Perhaps it belonged to her fairy nature.

Suddenly Bill shouted out "Miss Chalk," threw off the bandage, and caught her hands to kiss her! It was all in the forfeits: he had a right to do it, because he guessed her name. She laughed and struggled, the children and Helen were as wild Indians with glee, and Tod looked fit to bring the roof down. Just as Bill gave the kiss, Anna saw me.

Of course it created an interlude, and the forfeits were thrown up. Tod came out of his passion, feeling a little frightened.

"Johnny! Why, what in the world brings you here? Anything amiss with my father?"

"I am only come up on a visit, Tod, to Miss Deveen."

"Well, I'm sure!" cried Tod: as if he thought he ought to have all the visiting, and I none.

Sophie put her hand into mine. "I am so glad to see you again," she said in her softest tone. "And dear Mrs. Todhetley, how is she? and the sweet children?"

But she never waited to hear how; for she turned away at some question put by Bill Whitney.

Sir John came in, and the four old ones sat down to their whist in the small drawing-room opening from this. The children were sent to bed. Sophie Chalk went to the piano to sing a song under her breath, Tod putting himself on one side, Bill on the other.

"Are *both* of them going in for the lady's favour?" I asked of Anna, pointing to the piano, as she made room for me on the sofa.

"I think Miss Chalk would like it, Johnny."

"How well Bill is looking!"

"Oh, he has quite recovered; he seems all the stronger for his hurt. I suppose the rest and the nursing set him up."

"Is Sophie Chalk staying here?"

"No; there's hardly room for her. But she has been here every day and all day since we

came up. They send her home in a cab at night, and one of the maids has to go with her. It is Helen's arrangement."

"Do you like London, Anna?"

"No. I wish I had stayed at home."

"But why?"

"Well—but I can't tell you every reason."

"Tell me one?"

Anna did not answer. She sat looking out straight before her, her eyes full of trouble.

"Perhaps it is all nothing, Johnny. I may be fanciful and foolish, and so take up mistaken notions. Wrong ones, on more points than one."

"Do you mean anything—*there*?"

"Yes. It would be—I think—a terrible misfortune for us, if William were to engage himself to Sophie Chalk."

"You mean Tod, Anna?" I said, impulsively.

She blushed like a rose. "Down at Whitney I did think it was he; but since we came here she seems to have changed; to be—to be——"

"Going in for Bill. I put it plainly you see, Anna."

"I cannot help fearing that it would be a very sad mistake for either of them. Oh, Johnny, I am just tormented out of my peace, doubting whether or not I ought to speak. Sometimes I say to myself, yes it would be

right, it is my duty. And then again I fancy that I am altogether mistaken, and that there's nothing for me to say."

"But what could you say, Anna?"

Anna had been nervously winding her thin gold chain round her finger. She unwound it again before answering.

"Of course—what could I? And if I were to speak, and—and—find there was no cause," she dreamily added, "I should never forgive myself. The shame of it would rest with me throughout life."

"Well, I don't see that, Anna. Just because you fancied things were serious when they were not so! Where would be the shame?"

"You don't understand, Johnny. *I* should feel it. And so I wish I had stayed down at Whitney, out of the reach of torment. I wish another thing with all my heart—that Helen would not have Sophie Chalk here."

"I think you may take one consolation to yourself, Anna—that whatever you might urge against her, it would most likely make not the smallest difference one way or the other. With Tod I am sure it would not. If he set his mind on marrying Sophie Chalk, other people's grumbling would not turn him from it."

"It might depend a little on what the grumblings were," returned Anna, as if fighting for the last word. "But there; let it drop. I'd rather say no more."

She got up to reach a photograph book, and we began looking over it together.

“Good gracious! Here's Miss Cattledon! Small waist and all!”

Anna laughed. “She had it taken in Bath, and sent it to William. He had only asked her for it in joke.”

“So those studs have never turned up, Anna?”

“No. I wish they would. I should pray night and morning for it, if I thought it would do nobody an injury.”

“Johnny!” called out Sir John.

“Yes, sir.”

“Come you, and take my hand for five minutes. I have just remembered a note I ought to have written this afternoon.”

“I shall be sure to play badly,” I said to Lady Whitney, who had fallen to Sir John in cutting for partners.

“Oh, my dear, what does it matter?” she kindly answered. “I don't mind if you do. I do not play well myself.”

The next morning Miss Cattledon went out to ten o'clock daily service. Miss Deveen said she had taken to the habit of doing so. I wondered whether it was for the sake of religion, or for that grey-haired curate who did the

prayers. Sitting by ourselves, I told Miss Deveen of the commission I had from Mrs. Todhetley; and somehow, without my intending it, she gathered a little more.

"Go by all means, and learn what you can, Johnny. Go at once. I don't think you need, any of you, be afraid, though," she added, laughing. "I have seen very much of boy and girl love; seen that it rarely comes to anything. Young men mostly go through one or two such episodes before settling seriously to the business of life."

The omnibus took me to Oxford Street, and I found my way from thence to Torriana Square. It proved to be a corner house, its front entrance being in the square. But there was a smaller entrance on the side (which was rather a bustling street), and a kind of office window, on the wire blind of which was written, in white letters, "Mr. Smith, wine-merchant."

A wine-merchant! Well, I was surprised. Could there be any mistake? No, it was the right number. But I thought there must be, and stood staring at the place with both eyes. That *was* a come-down. Not but what wine-merchants are as good as other people; only Sophie Chalk had somehow imparted the notion of their living up to lords and ladies.

I asked at the front door for Mrs. Smith, and was shown upstairs to a handsome drawing-room. A little girl, with a sallow face, thin

and sickly, was seated there. She did not get up, only stared at me with her dark, keen, deep-set eyes.

“Do you know where your mamma is, Miss Trot?” asked the servant, putting a chair.

“You can go and search for her.”

She looked at me so intently as the maid left the room, that I told her who I was, and what I had come for. The child’s tongue—it seemed as sharp a one as Miss Cattledon’s—was let loose.

“I have heard of you, Johnny Ludlow. Mrs. Smith would be glad to see you. You had better wait.”

I don’t know how it is that I make myself at home with people; or, rather, that people seem so soon to be at home with me. I don’t *try* for it, but it is always so. In two or three minutes, when the girl was talking to me as freely as though I were her brother, the maid came back again.

“Miss Trot, I cannot find your mamma.”

“Mrs. Smith’s out. But I was not obliged to tell you so. I’ll not spare you any work when you call me Miss Trot.”

The maid’s only answer was to leave the room; and the little girl—who spoke like a woman—shook her dark hair from her face in temper.

“I’ve told them over and over again I will not be called Miss Trot. How would you like

it? Because my mamma took to say it when I was a baby, it is no reason why other people should."

"Perhaps your mamma says it still, and so they fall into it also."

"My mamma is dead."

Just at the moment I did not take the meaning of the words. "Mrs. Smith dead!"

"Mrs. Smith is not my mother. Don't you insult me, please. She came here as my governess. If papa chose to make a fool of himself by marrying her afterwards, it was not my fault. What are you looking at?"

I was looking at her: she seemed so strange a child; and feeling slightly puzzled between the other Mrs. Smith and this one. They say I am a muff at many things; I'm sure I am at understanding complicated relationships.

"Then—Miss Chalk is—*this* Mrs. Smith's sister?"

"Well, you might know that. They are a pair, and I don't like either of them. There are two crying babies upstairs now."

"Mrs. Smith's?"

"Yes, Mrs. Smith's"—with intense aggravation. "Papa had quite enough with me, and I could have managed the house and servants as well as *she* does. And because Nancy Chalk was not enough, in addition we must be never safe from Sophonisba! Oh, there are crosses in life!"

“ Who is Sophonisba ? ”

“ She is Sophonisba.”

“ Perhaps you mean Sophie Chalk ? ”

“ Her name’s not Sophie, or Sophia either. She was christened Sophonisba, but she hates the name, and takes care to drop it always. She is a deep one, is Sophonisba Chalk ! ”

“ Is this her home ? ”

“ She makes it her home, when she’s not out teaching. And papa never seems to see it as an encroachment. Sophonisba Chalk does not keep her places, you know. She thought she had got into something fine last autumn at Lord Augustus Difford’s, but Lady Augustus gave her warning at the first month’s end.”

“ Then Miss Chalk is a governess ? ”

“ What else do you suppose she is ? She comes over people, and gets a tock of invitations on hand, and goes to them between times. You should hear the trouble there is about her dresses, that she may make a good appearance. And how she does it I can’t think ; they don’t tell me their contrivances. Mrs. Smith must give her some—I am sure of it—which papa has to pay for ; and Sophonisba goes in trust for others.”

“ She was always dressed well down with us.”

“ Of course she was. Whitney Hall was her great card place ; but the time for the visit was so long before it was fixed, she thought it had all dropped through. It came just right : just

when she was turned out of Lady Augustus Difford's. Helen Whitney had promised it a long while before."

"I know; when they were schoolfellows at Miss Lakon's."

"They were not schoolfellows. Sophonisba was treated as the rest, but she was only improving pupil. She gave her services, learnt of some of the masters, and paid nothing. How old do you think she is?" broke off Miss Trot.

"About twenty."

"She was six-and-twenty last birthday; and they say she will look like a child till she's six-and-thirty. I call it a shame for a young woman of that age to be doing nothing for herself, but to be living on strangers: and papa and I are nothing else to her."

"How old are you?" I could not help asking.

"Fifteen: nearly sixteen. People take me to be younger, because I am short, and it vexes me. They'd not think me young if they knew how I feel. Oh, I can tell you it is a sharpening thing for your papa to marry again, and to find yourself put down in your own home."

"Has Miss Chalk any engagement now?"

"She has not had an engagement all this year, and now it's April! I don't believe she looks after one. She pretends to teach me—while she's waiting, she says; but it's all a farce; I won't learn of her. I heard her tell

Mr. Everyt. I was a horrid child. Fancy that!"

"Who is Mr. Everyt?"

"Papa's head-clerk. He is a gentleman, you know, and Sophonisba thinks great things of him. Ah, I could tell something, if I liked! but she put me on my honour. Oh, she's a sly one! Just now, she is all her time at the Whitneys, fire-hot for it. You are not going? Stay to luncheon."

"I must go; Miss Deveen will be waiting for me. You can deliver the parcel, please, with Mrs. Todhetley's message. I will call in to see Mrs. Smith another day."

"And to see me too?" came the quick retort.

"Yes, of course."

"Now, mind you don't break your word. I shall say it is me you are coming to call upon; they think I am nobody in this house. Ask for *Miss* Smith when you come. Good-bye, Johnny Ludlow!"

She never stirred as I shook hands; she seemed never to have stirred hand or foot throughout the interview. But, as I opened the door, there came an odd sort of noise, and I turned to look what it was.

She. Hastening to cross the room, with a crutch, to ring the bell! And I saw that she was both lame and deformed.

In passing down the side street by the office,

some one brushed by, with the quick step of a London business man. Where had I seen the face before ? Whose did it put me in mind of ? Why—it came to me all in a minute—Roger Monk's ! He who had lived at Dyke Manor for a short while as head gardener under false auspices. But, as I have not said anything about him before, I will not enter into the history now. Before I could turn to look, Monk had disappeared ; no doubt round the corner of the square.

“ Tod,” I said, as soon as I came across him, “ Sophie Chalk's a governess.”

“ Well, what of that ? ” asked Tod.

“ Not much ; but she might as well have been candid with us at Dyke Manor.”

“ A governess is a lady.”

“ Ought to be. But why did she make out to us that she had been a visitor at the Diffords', when she was only the teacher ? We should have respected her just as much ; perhaps, made more of her.”

“ What are you cavilling at ? As if a lady were never a teacher before ! ”

“ Oh, Tod ! it is not that. Don't you see ? —if she had kept a chandler's shop, and been open about it, what should we have cared ? It was the sailing under false colours ; the trying to pass herself off for what she is not.”

He gave no answer to this, except a whistle.

“ She is turned six-and-twenty, Tod. And

she was not a school-girl at Miss Lakon's, but governess-pupil."

"I suppose she was a school-girl once?"

"I suppose she was."

"Good. What else have you to say, wise Johnny?"

"Nothing."

Nothing; for where was the use? Sophie Chalk would have been only an angel in his eyes, though he heard that she had sold apples at a street-corner. Sophie, that very morning, had begged Lady Whitney to let her instruct the younger children, "as a friend," so long as they were in town; for the governess at Whitney was a daily one, and they had not brought her. Lady Whitney at first demurred, and then kissed Sophie for her goodness. The result was, that a bed was found for Miss Chalk, and she stayed with them altogether.

But I can't say much for the teaching. It was not Sophie Chalk's fault, perhaps. Helen would be in the school-room, and Harry would be there; and I and Anna sometimes; and Tod and Bill always. Lady Whitney looked upon this London sojourn as a holiday, and did not mind whether the children learnt or played, provided they were kept passably quiet. I told Sophie of my visit to take the fichu, and she made a wry face over the lame girl.

"That Mabel Smith! Poor morbid little object! What she would have grown into but

for the fortunate chance of my sister's marrying into the house, I can't imagine, Johnny. I'll draw you her portrait in her night-cap, by-and-by."

The days went on. We did have fun : but war was growing up between William Whitney and Tod. There could no longer be a mistake (to those who understood things and kept their eyes open) of the part Sophie Chalk was playing: and that was the trying to throw Tod over for William Whitney, and to make no fuss about it. I don't believe she cared a brass button for either : but Bill's future position in life would be better than Tod's, seeing that his father was a baronet. Bill was going in for her favour ; perhaps not seriously: it might have been for the fun of the moment, or to amuse himself by spiting Tod. Sir John and my lady never so much as dreamt of the by-playing running on before their faces, and I don't think Helen did.

"I told you she'd fascinate the hair off your head, Bill, give her the chance," said I to him one day in the school-room, when Miss Chalk was teaching her pupils to dance.

"You shut up, Johnny," he said, laughing, and shied the atlas at me.

Before the day was out, there was a sharp, short quarrel. They were all coming for the evening to Miss Deveen's. I went in at dusk to tell them not to make it nine at night. Turning into the drawing-room, I interrupted a scene—Bill Whitney and Tod railing at one

another. What the bone of dispute was I never knew, for they seemed to have got to the tail of it.

“ You did,” said Tod.

“ I did not,” said Bill.

“ I tell you, you *did*, William Whitney.”

“ Let it go; it’s word against word, and we shall never decide it. You are mistaken, Todhetley: but I am not going to ask your leave what I shall do, or what I shan’t.”

“ You have no right to say to Miss Chalk what I heard you saying to-day.”

“ I tell you, you did not hear me say anything of the sort. Put it that you did—what business is it of yours? If I chose to go in for her, to ask her to be the future Lady Whitney—many a year may it be, though, I hope, before I step into my father’s place, good old man!—who has the right to say me nay? ”

Tod was foaming. Dusk though it was, I could see that. They took no more account of my being present, than of Harry’s little barking dog.

“ Look here, Bill Whitney. If ——”

“ Are you boys quarrelling? ”

The interruption was Anna’s. Passing across the hall, she had heard the voices and looked in. As if glad of the excuse to get away, Bill Whitney followed her from the room. Tod went out and banged the hall-door after him.

I waited, thinking Anna might come in, and

strolled into the little drawing-room. There, quiet as a mouse, stood Sophie Chalk. She had been listening, for certain; and I hope it gratified her: her eyes sparkled a little.

“Why, Johnny! was it *you* making all that noise? What was the matter? Anything gone wrong?”

It was all very fine to try it on with me. I just looked straight at her, and I think she saw as much. Saying something about going to search for Helen, she left the room.

“What was the trouble, Johnny?” whispered Anna, stealing up to me.

“Only those two having a jar.”

“I heard that. But what was it about? Sophie Chalk?”

“Well, yes; that was it, Anna.”

We were at the front window then. A man was lighting the lamps in the road, and Anna seemed to be occupied in watching him. There was enough care on her face to set one up in the dismals for life.

“No harm may come of it, Anna. Any way, you can do nothing.”

“Oh, Johnny, I wish I knew!” she said, clasping her hands. “I wish I could satisfy myself which way the *right* lies. If I were to speak, it might be put down to the wrong motive. I try to see whether that thought is not a selfish one, whether I ought to let it deter me. But then—but then—that’s not the worst.”

“ That sounds like a riddle, Anna.”

“ I wish I had some good, judicious person who would hear all and judge for me,” she said, rather dreamily. “ If you were older, Johnny, I think I would tell you.”

“ I am as old as you, at any rate.”

“ That’s just it. We are neither of us old enough nor experienced enough to trust to our own judgment.”

“ There’s your mother, Anna.”

“ I know.”

“ What you mean is, that Sir John and Lady Whitney ought to have their eyes opened to what’s going on, that they may put an end to Miss Chalk’s intimacy here, if they deem the danger warrants it ?”

“ That’s near enough, Johnny. And I don’t see my way sufficiently clear to do it.”

“ Put the case to Helen.”

“ She would only laugh in my face. Hush! here comes some one.”

It was Sophie Chalk. She looked rather sharply at us both, and said she could not find Helen anywhere.

And the days were to go on in public smoothness and private discomfort, Miss Sophie exercising her fascinations on the whole of us.

But for having promised that lame child to call again in Torriana Square, I should not have cared to go. It was afternoon this time. The servant showed me up-stairs, and said her mistress was for the moment engaged. Mabel Smith sat in the same seat in her black frock ; some books lay on a small table drawn before her.

“ I thought you had forgotten to come.”

“ Did you ? I should be sure not to forget it.”

“ I am so tired with my lessons,” she said, irritably, sweeping the books away with her long thin fingers. “ I always am when *they* teach me. Mrs. Smith has kept me at them for two hours ; she is gone down now to engage a new servant.”

“ I get frightfully tired of my lessons sometimes.”

“ Ah, but not as I do ; you can run about : and learning, you know, will never be of use to me. I want you to tell me something : Is Sophonisba Chalk going to stay at Lady Whitney’s ? ”

“ I don’t know. They will not be so very long in town.”

“ But I mean is she to be governess there, and go into the country with them ? ”

“ No, I think not ? ”

“ She wants to. If she does, papa says he shall have some nice young lady to sit with me and teach me. Oh, I do hope she will go with

them, and then the house would be rid of her. I say she will : it is too good a chance for her to let slip. Mrs. Smith says she won't : she told Mr. Evertly so last night. He wouldn't believe her, and was very cross over it."

" Cross over it ? "

" He said Sophonisba ought not to have gone there at all without consulting him, and that she had not been home once since, and only written him one rubbishing note that had nothing in it ; and he asked Mrs. Smith whether she thought that was right."

A light flashed over me. " Is Miss Chalk to marry Mr. Evertly ? "

" I suppose that's what it will come to," answered the curious child. " She has promised to ; but promises with her don't go for much when it suits her to break them. Sophonisba put me on my honour not to tell ; but now that Mr. Evertly has spoken to Mrs. Smith and papa, it is different. I saw it a long while ago ; before she went to the Diffords'. I have nothing to do but to sit and watch and think, you see, Johnny Ludlow ; and I perceive things quicker than other people."

" But—why do you fancy Miss Chalk may break her promise to Mr. Evertly ? "

" If she meant to keep it, why should she be scheming to go away as the Whitneys' governess ? I know what it is : Sophonisba does not think Mr. Evertly good enough for her,

but she'd like to keep him waiting on, for fear of not getting anybody better."

Anything so shrewd as Mabel Smith's manner of saying this, was never seen. I don't think she was naturally ill-natured, poor thing ; but she evidently thought she was being wronged amidst them, and it made her spitefully resentful.

"Mr. Everyt had better let her go. It is not I that would marry a wife who dyed her hair."

"Is Miss Chalk's dyed ? I thought it might be the gold dust."

"Have you any eyes ?" retorted Mabel. "When she was down in the country with you her hair was brown ; it's a kind of yellow now. Oh, she knows how to set herself off, I can tell you. Do you happen to remember who was reigning in England when the massacre of St. Bartholomew took place in France ? "

The change of subject was sudden. I told her it was Queen Elizabeth.

"Queen Elizabeth, was it ? I'll write it down. Mrs. Smith says I shall have no dessert to-day, if I don't tell her. She puts those questions only to vex me. As if it mattered to anybody. Oh, here's papa ! "

A little man came in with a bald head and pleasant face. He said he was glad to see me and shook hands. She put out her arms, and he came and kissed her : her eyes followed him

everywhere ; her cheeks had a sudden colour : it was easy to see that he was her one great joy in life. And the bright colour made her poor thin face look almost charming.

“I can’t stay a minute, Trottie ; going out in a hurry. I think I left my gloves up here.”

“So you did, papa. There was a tiny hole in the thumb and I mended it for you.”

“That’s my little attentive daughter ! Good-bye. Mr. Ludlow, if you will stay to dinner we shall be happy.”

Mrs. Smith came in as he left the room. She was rather a plain likeness of Miss Chalk, not much older. But her face had a straightforward open look, and I liked her. She made much of me and said how kind she had thought it of Mrs. Todhetley to be at the trouble of making a fichu for her, a stranger. She hoped—she did hope, she added rather anxiously, that Sophie had not asked her to do it. And it struck me that Mrs. Smith had not quite the implicit confidence in Miss Sophie’s sayings and doings that she might have had.

It was five o’clock when I got away. At the door of the office in the side street stood a gentleman—the same I had seen pass me the other day. I looked at him, and he at me.

“Is it Roger Monk ?”

A kind of startled look came over his face. He evidently did not remember me. I said who I was.

“ Dear me ! How you have grown ! Do walk in.” And he spoke to me in the tone an equal would speak, not as a servant.

As he was leading the way into a kind of parlour, we passed a clerk at a desk, and a man talking to him.

“ Here’s Mr. Everty ; he will tell you,” said the clerk, indicating Monk. “ He is asking about those samples of pale brandy, sir : whether they are to go.”

“ Yes, of course ; you ought to have taken them before this, Wilson,” was Roger Monk’s answer. And so I saw that he was Mr. Everty.

“ I have resumed my true name, Everty,” he said to me in a low tone. “ The former trouble, that sent me away a wanderer, is over. Many men, I believe, are forced into such episodes in life.”

“ You are with Mr. Smith ? ”

“ These two years past. I came to him as head clerk ; I now have a commission on sales, and make a most excellent thing of it. I don’t think the business could get on without me now.”

“ Is it true that you are to marry Miss Chalk ? ” I asked, speaking on a sudden impulse.

“ Quite true ; if she does not throw me over,” he answered, and I wondered at his candour. “ I suppose you have heard of it in-doors ? ”

“ Yes. I wish you all success.”—And didn’t I wish it in my inmost heart !

"Thank you. I can give her a good home now. Perhaps you will not talk about that old time if you can help it, Mr. Ludlow. You used to be good-natured, I remember. It was a dark page in my then reckless life; I am doing what I can to redeem it."

I daresay he was; and I told him he need not fear. But I did not like his eyes yet, for they had the same kind of shifty look that Roger Monk's used to have. He might get on none the worse in business; for, as the Squire says, it is a shifty world.

Sophie Chalk engaged to Mr. Everty, and he Roger Monk! Well, it was a complication. I went back to Miss Deveen's without, so to say, seeing daylight.

XV.

THE GAME FINISHED.

THE ting-tang of the distant church was ringing out fiercely for the daily morning service, and Miss Cattledon was picking her way across the road to attend to it, with her thin white legs displayed, and a water-proof cloak on. It had rained in the night, but the clouds were breaking, promising a fine day. I stood at the window, watching the legs and the pools of water ; Miss Deveen sat at the table behind, answering a letter that had come to her by the morning's post.

"Have you ever thought mine a peculiar name, Johnny?" she suddenly asked.

"No," I said, turning round to answer her. "I think it a pretty one."

"It was originally French : De Vigne : but like many other things has been corrupted with time, and made into what it is. Is that ten o'clock striking ?"

Yes : and the bell was ceasing. Miss Cattledon would be late. It was a regular penalty to her, I knew, to go out so early, and quite a new whim, begun in the middle of Lent.

She talked a little in her vinegar way at the world's wickedness in not spending some of its working hours inside a church, listening to that delightful curate with the mild voice, whose hair had turned grey prematurely. Miss Deveen, knowing it was meant for her, laughed pleasantly, and said if the many years' prayers from her chamber had not been heard as well as though she had gone into a church to offer them up, she should be in a poor condition now. I went with Miss Cattledon one Monday morning out of politeness. There were nine-and-twenty in the pews, for I counted them: eight-and-twenty being single ladies (to go by the look), some young, some as old as Cattledon. The grey-haired curate was assisted by a young deacon, who had a black beard and a lisp and his hair parted down the middle. It was very edifying, especially the ten minutes' gossip with the two clergymen coming out, when we all congregated in the aisle by the door.

"My great grandfather was a grand old proprietor in France, Johnny; a baron," continued Miss Deveen. "I don't think I have much of the French nature left in me."

"I suppose you speak French well, Miss Deveen?"

"Not a word of it, Johnny. They pretended to teach it me when I was a child, but I'm afraid I was unusually stupid. Why, who can this be?"

She alluded to a ring at the visitors' bell. One of the servants came in and said that the gentleman who had called once or twice before had come again.

Miss Deveen looked up, first at the servant, then at me. She seemed to be considering.

"I will see him in two or three minutes, George"—and the man shut the door.

"Johnny," she said, "I have taken you partly into my confidence in this affair of the lost studs; I think I will tell you a little more. After I sent for Lettice Lane here—and my impression, as I told you, was very strong in favour of her innocence—it occurred to me that I ought to see if anything could be done to prove it; or at least set the matter at rest, one way or the other, instead of leaving it to time and chance. The question was, how could I do it? I did not like to apply to the police, lest more might have been made of it than I wished. One day a friend of mine, to whom I was relating the circumstances, solved the difficulty. He said he would send to me some one with whom he was well acquainted, a Mr. Bond, who had once been connected with the detective police, and who had got his dismissal through an affair he was thought to have mismanaged. It sounded rather formidable to my ears, 'once connected with the detective police'; but I consented, and Mr. Bond came. He has had the thing in hand since last February."

“And what has he found out?”

“Nothing, Johnny. Unless he has come to tell me now that he has—for it is he who is waiting. I think it may be so, as he has called so early. First of all, he was following up the matter down in Worcestershire, because the notion he entertained was, that the studs must have been taken by some one of the Whitneys’ servants. He stayed in the neighbourhood, pursuing his inquiries as to their characters and habits, and visiting all the pawnbrokers’ shops that he thought were at available distances from the Hall.”

“Did he think it was Lettice Lane?”

“He *said* he did not: but he took care (as I happen to know) to worm out all he could of Lettice’s antecedents while he was inquiring about the rest. I had the girl into this room at his first visit, not alarming her, simply saying that I was relating the history of the studs’ disappearance to this friend who had called, and desired her to describe her share in it to make the story complete. Lettice suspected nothing; she told the tale simply and naturally, devoid of fear: and from that very moment, Johnny, I have felt certain in my own mind the girl is as innocent as I am. Mr. Bond ‘*thought* she might be,’ but he would not go beyond that; for women, he said, were crafty, and knew how to make one think black was white.”

"Miss Deveen, suppose, after all, it should turn out to have been Lettice?" I asked.
"Should you proceed against her?"

"I shall not proceed against anyone, Johnny; and I shall hush the matter up if I can," she answered, ringing for Mr. Bond to be shown in.

I was curious to see him also; ideas floating through my brain of cocked-hats and blue uniform and Richard Mayne. Mr. Bond turned out to be a very inoffensive-looking individual indeed; a little man, wearing steel spectacles, in a black frock-coat and grey trousers.

"When I last saw you, madam," he began, after he was seated, and Miss Deveen had told him he might speak before me, "I mentioned that I had abandoned my search in the country, and intended to prosecute my inquiries in London."

"You did, Mr. Bond."

"That the theft lay amid Sir John Whitney's female servants, I have thought likely all along," continued Mr. Bond. "If the purloiner felt afraid to dispose of the emeralds after taking them—and I could find no trace of them in the country—the probability was that she would keep them secreted about her, and get rid of them as soon as she came to London, if she were one of the maids brought up by Lady Whitney. There were two I thought in particular might have done it; one was the lady's

maid; the other, the upper-housemaid, who had been ill the night of their disappearance. All kinds of ruses are played off in the pursuit of plunder, as we have cause to learn every day; and it struck me the housemaid might have feigned illness, the better to cover her actions and throw suspicion off herself. I am bound to say I could not learn anything against either of these two young women; but their business took them about the rooms at Whitney Hall; and an open jewel-case is a great temptation."

"It is," assented Miss Deveen. "That carelessness lay at my door, and therefore I determined never to prosecute in this case; never, in fact, to bring the offender to open shame of any sort in regard to it."

"And that has served to increase the difficulty," remarked Mr. Bond. "Could the women have been searched and their private places at Whitney Hall turned out, we might or might not have found the emeralds; but——"

"I'd not have had it done for the Lord Chancellor, sir," hotly interrupted Miss Deveen. "One was searched, and that was quite enough for me, for I believe her to be innocent. If you can get at the right person for me quietly, for my own satisfaction, well and good. My instructions went so far but no farther."

Mr. Bond took off his spectacles to ease his

face for a minute, and put them on again. "I understood this perfectly when I took the business in hand," he quietly said. "Well, madam, to go on. Lady Whitney brought her servants to London, and I came up also. Last night I gleaned a little light."

He paused, and put his hand into his pocket. I looked, and Miss Deveen looked.

"Should you know the studs again?" he asked her.

"You may as well ask me if I should know my own face in the glass, Mr. Bond. Of course I should."

Mr. Bond opened a pill-box: three green studs lay in it on white cotton. He held it out to Miss Deveen.

"Are these they?"

"No, certainly not," replied Miss Deveen, speaking like one in frightful disappointment. "Those are not to be compared to mine, sir."

Mr. Bond put the bit of top cotton on, and the lid on that, and returned them to his pocket. Out came another box, long and thin.

"These are my studs," quickly exclaimed Miss Deveen, before she had given more than a glance. "You can look for yourself to the private marks I told you of, Mr. Bond."

Three brilliant emeralds, that seemed to light up the room, connected together on the inner side by a fine chain of gold. At either end, the chain was finished off by a small thin

square plate of gold, on one of which was an engraved crest, on the other Miss Deveen's initials. In form the emeralds looked like buttons more than studs.

"I never knew they were linked together, Miss Deveen," I exclaimed in surprise.

"Did you not, Johnny?"

Never. My mind had always pictured them as three loose studs. Mr. Bond, who no doubt had the marks by heart before he brought them up, began shutting them into the box as he had the others.

"Anticipating from the first that the studs would most probably be found at a pawn-broker's, if found at all, I ventured to speak to you then of a difficulty that might attend the finding," said he to Miss Deveen. "Unless a thing can be proved by law to have been stolen, a pawnbroker cannot be forced to give it up. And I am under an engagement to return these studs to the pawnbroker, whence I have brought them, in the course of the morning."

"You may do so," said Miss Deveen. "I daresay he and I can come to an amicable arrangement in regard to giving them up later. My object has been to discover who stole them, not to bring trouble or loss upon pawnbrokers. How did you discover them, Mr. Bond?"

"In rather a singular manner. Last evening, in making my way to Regent Street to a place where I had to go on business, I saw a

young woman turn out of a pawnbroker's shop, whose shutters were put up, but its doors open. Her face struck me as being familiar; and I remembered her as Lady Whitney's housemaid —the same who had been ill in bed, or pretended to be, the night the studs were lost. Ah, ha, I thought, some discovery may be looming. I have some acquaintance with the proprietor of the shop; a very respectable man indeed, who has got on to wealth by dint of hard, honest work, and is a jeweller now as well as a pawnbroker. My own business could wait, and I went in and found him busy with accounts in his private room. He thought at first I had but called in to see him in passing. I gave him no particulars; but said I fancied a person in whom I was interested professionally, had just been leaving some emerald studs in his shop."

"What is the pawnbroker's name!" interrupted Miss Deveen.

"James. He went to inquire, and came back, saying that his assistant denied it. There was only one assistant in the shop: the other had left for the night. He, this assistant, said that no person had been in during the last half-hour, except a young woman, a cousin of his wife's; who did not come to pledge anything, but simply to say how d'ye do, and to ask where they were living now, that she might call and see his wife. Mr. James added that the

man said she occupied a good situation in the family of Sir John and Lady Whitney, and was not likely to require to pledge anything. Plausible enough, this, you see, Miss Deveen ; but the coincidence was singular. I then told James that I had been in search for these two months of some emerald studs lost out of Sir John Whitney's house. He stared a little at this, and asked whether they were of unusual value and very beautiful. Just so, I said, and described them minutely. Mr. James, without another word, went away and brought the studs in. Your studs, Miss Deveen.”

“ And how did he come by them ? ”

“ He won't tell me much about it—except that they took in the goods some weeks ago in the ordinary course of business. The fact is he is vexed : for he has really been careful and has managed to avoid these unpleasant episodes, to which all pawnbrokers are liable. It was with difficulty I could get him to let me bring them up here : and that only on the condition that they should be in his hands again before the clock struck twelve.”

“ You shall keep faith with him. But now, Mr. Bond, what is your opinion of this ? ”

“ My opinion is that that same young woman stole the studs : and that she contrived to get them conveyed to London to this assistant, her relative, who no doubt advanced money upon them. I cannot see my way to any other con-

clusion under the circumstances," continued Mr. Bond, firmly. "But for James's turning crusty, I might have learned more."

"I will go to him myself," said Miss Deveen, with sudden resolution. "When he finds that my intention is to hold his pocket harmless and make no disturbance in any way, he will not be crusty with me. But this matter must be cleared up if it be possible to clear it."

Miss Deveen was not one to be slow of action, once any resolve was taken. Mr. Bond made no attempt to oppose her: on the contrary, he seemed to think it might be well that she did go. She sent George out for a street cab, in preference to taking her carriage, and said I might accompany her. We were off long before Miss Cattledon's conference with the curates inside the church was over.

The shop was in a rather obscure street, not far from Regent Street. I inquired for Mr. James at the private door, and he came out to the cab. Miss Deveen said she had called to speak to him on particular business, and he took us upstairs to a handsomely furnished room. He was a well-dressed, portly, good-looking man, with a pleasant face and quietly easy manners. Miss Deveen, bidding him sit down near her, explained the affair in a few words, and asked him to *help* her elucidate it. He responded to her frankness at once, and said he would willingly give all the aid in his power.

"Singular to say, I took these studs in myself," he observed. "I never do these things now, but my foreman had a holiday that day to attend a funeral, and I was in the shop. They were pledged on the 27th of January: since Mr. Bond left this morning I have been referring to my books."

The 27th of January. It was on the night of the 23rd that the studs disappeared. Then the thief had not lost much time! I said so.

"Stay a minute, Johnny," cried Miss Deveen: "you young ones sum up things too quickly for me. Let me trace events back. The studs, as you say, were lost on the 23rd; the loss was discovered on the 24th, and Lettice Lane discharged; on the 25th those of us staying at Whitney Hall began to talk of leaving; and on the 26th you two went home after seeing Miss Chalk off by rail to London."

"And Mrs. Hughes too. They went up together."

"Who is Mrs. Hughes?" asked Miss Deveen.

"Don't you remember?—that young married lady who came to the dance with the Featherstons. She lives somewhere in London."

Miss Deveen stared a little. "I don't remember any Mrs. Hughes, Johnny."

"But, dear Miss Deveen, you must remember her," I persisted. "She was very young-looking, as little as Sophie Chalk; Harry Whitney,

dancing with her, trod off the tail of her thin pink dress. I heard old Featherston telling you about Mrs. Hughes, saying it was a sad history. Her husband lost his money after they were married, and had been obliged to take a small situation."

Recollection flashed over Miss Deveen. "Yes, I remember now. A pale, lady-like little woman with a sad face. But let us go back to business. You all left on the 26th; I and Miss Cattledon on the 27th. Now, while the visitors were at the Hall, I don't think the upper housemaid could have had time to go out and send off the studs by rail. Still less could she have come up herself to pledge them."

Miss Deveen's head was running on Mr. Bond's theory.

"It was no housemaid that pledged the studs," spoke Mr. James.

"I was about to say, Mr. James, that if you took them in yourself over the counter, they could not have been sent up to your assistant."

"All the people about me are trustworthy, I can assure you, ma'am," he interrupted. "They would not lend themselves to such a thing. It was a lady who pledged those studs."

"A lady?"

"Yes, ma'am, a lady. And to tell the truth, if I may venture to say it, the description you have now given of a lady just tallies with her."

"Mrs. Hughes?"

"It seems so to me," continued Mr. James. "Little, pale, and lady-like: that is just what she was."

"Dear me!" cried Miss Deveen, letting her hands drop on her lap as if they were lead. "You had better tell me as much as you can recollect, please."

"It was at dusk," said Mr. James. "Not quite dark, but the lamps were lighted in the streets and the gas indoors: just the hour, ma'am, that gentlefolks choose for bringing their things. I happened to be standing near the door, when a lady came into the shop and asked to see the principal. I said I was he, and retired behind the counter. She brought out these emerald studs"—touching the box—"and said she wanted to sell them, or pledge them for their utmost value. She told me a tale, in apparent confidence, of a brother who had fallen into debt at college, and she was trying to get together some money to help him, or frightful trouble might come of it. If it was not genuine," broke off Mr. James, "she was the best actor I ever saw in all my life."

"Please go on."

"I saw the emeralds were very rare and beautiful. She said they were an heirloom from her mother, who had brought the stones from India and had them linked together in England. I told her I could not buy; she rejoined that it might be better only to pledge,

for they would not be entirely lost to her and she might redeem them ere twelve months were past if I would keep them as long as that. I explained that the law exacted it. The name she gave was Mary Drake, asking if I had ever heard of the famous old forefather of theirs, Admiral Drake. The name answers to the initials on the gold."

" 'M. D.' They were engraved for Margaret Deveen. Perhaps she claimed the crest, also, Mr. James," added that lady, sarcastically.

" She did, ma'am ; in so far as that she said it was the crest of the Drake family."

" And you call her a lady ! "

" She had every appearance of one, in tone and language too. Her hand—she took one of her gloves off when showing the studs—was a lady's hand ; small, delicate, and white as alabaster. Ma'am, rely upon it, though she may not be a lady in deeds, she must be living the life of one."

" But now, who was it ? "

Yes, who was it ? Miss Deveen, looking at us, seemed to wait for an answer, but she did not get one.

" How much did you lend upon the studs ? "

" Ten pounds. Of course that is nothing like their value."

" Should you know her again ? How was she dressed ? "

" She wore an ordinary Paisley shawl ; it

was cold weather ; and had a thick veil over her face, which she never lifted.”

“ Should not that have excited your suspicion ? ” interrupted Miss Deveen. “ I don’t like people who keep their veils down while they talk to you.”

The pawnbroker smiled. “ Most ladies keep them down when they come here. As to knowing her again, I am quite certain that I should ; and her voice too. Whoever she was, she went about it very systematically, and took me in completely. Her asking for the principal may have thrown me somewhat off my guard.”

We came away, leaving the studs with Mr. James : the time had not arrived for Miss Deveen to redeem them. She seemed very thoughtful as we went along in the cab.

“ Johnny,” she said, breaking the silence, “ we talk lightly enough about the Finger of Providence ; but I don’t know what else it can be that has led to this discovery so far. Out of the hundreds of pawnbroking establishments scattered about the metropolis, it is wonderfully strange that this should have been the one the studs were taken to ; and furthermore, that Bond should have been passing it last night at the moment Lady Whitney’s housemaid came forth. Had the studs been pledged elsewhere, we might never have heard of them ; neither, as it is, but for the housemaid’s being connected with Mr. James’s assistant.”

Of course it was strange.

"You were surprised to see the studs connected together, Johnny. That was the point I mentioned in reference to Lettice Lane. 'One might have fallen down,' she sobbed out to me, in leaving Whitney Hall; 'even two; but it's beyond the bounds of probability that three should, ma'am.' She was thinking of the studs as separate studs; and it convinced me that she had never seen them. True, an artful woman might say so purposely to deceive me, but I am sure that Lettice has not the art for it. But now, Johnny, we must consider what steps to take next. I shall not rest until the matter is cleared."

"Suppose it should never get on any further!"

"Suppose you are like a young bear, all your experience to come?" retorted Miss Deeven. "Why, Johnny Ludlow, do you think that when that Finger I ventured to speak of is directing a course onwards, that It halts midway? There cannot, I fear, be much doubt as to the thief; but we must get proof."

"You think it was——"

"Mrs. Hughes. How can I think else? She is very nice, and I could not have believed it of her. I suppose the sight of the jewels, combined with her state of poverty, must have proved the temptation. I shall get back the emeralds, but we must screen her."

“ Miss Deveen, I don’t believe it was Mrs. Hughes.”

“ Not believe it ! ”

“ No. Her face is not that of one who would do such a thing. You might trust it anywhere.”

“ Oh, Johnny ! there you are at your faces again ! ”

“ Well, I never was deceived in any face yet. Not in one that I *thoroughly* trusted.”

“ If Mrs. Hughes did not take the studs, and bring them to London, and pledge them, who else could have brought them ? They were taken to Mr. James’s on the 27th, remember.”

“ That’s the puzzle of it.”

“ We must find out Mrs. Hughes, and then contrive to bring her within sight of Mr. James.”

“ The Whitneys know where she lives. Anna and Helen have been to call upon her.”

“ Then our way is pretty plain. Mind you don’t breathe a syllable of this to mortal ear, Johnny. It might defeat ends. Miss Cattledon, always inquisitive, will question where we have been this morning with her curious eyes ; but for once she will not get satisfied.”

“ I should not keep her, Miss Deveen.”

“ Yes you would, Johnny. She is faithful ; she suits me very well ; and her mother and I were girls together.”

It was a sight to be painted. Helen Whitney standing there in her presentation dress. Oh, she looked well. It was all white, with a train behind longer than three peacocks' tails, lace and feathers hanging from her hair. The whole lot of us were round her ; the young ones had come from the nursery, the servants peeped in at the door ; Miss Cattledon had her eyeglass up ; Harry danced.

“ Helen, my dear, I admire all very much except your necklace and bracelets,” said Miss Deveen, critically. “ They do not match : and do not accord with the dress.”

The necklace was a row of turquoise beads, it did not look much ; the bracelets were gold with blue stones in the clasps. The Whitney family did not shine in jewels, and the few diamonds they possessed were on Lady Whitney to-day.

“ But I had nothing else, Miss Deveen,” said Helen, simply. “ Mamma said these must do.”

Miss Deveen took off the string of blue beads as if to examine them, and left in its place the most beautiful pearl necklace ever seen. There was a scream of surprise ; some of us had only met with such transformations in fairy tales.

“ And these are the bracelets to match, my dear. Anna, I shall give you the same when your turn for making your curtsey to your queen comes.”

Anna smiled faintly as she looked her thanks. She always seemed regularly down in spirits now, not to be raised by pearl necklaces. For the first time her sad countenance seemed to strike Tod. He crossed over.

“What is amiss, Anna?” he whispered.
“Are you not well?”

“Quite well, thank you,” she answered, her cheeks flushing painfully.

At this moment Sophie Chalk created a diversion. Unable to restrain her feelings longer, she burst into tears, knelt down outside Helen’s dress, and began kissing her hand and its pearl bracelet in a transport of glad joy.

“Oh, Helen, my dear friend, how rejoiced I am! I said upstairs that your ornaments were not worthy of you.”

Tod’s eyes were glued to her. Bill Whitney called out Bravo. Sophie, kneeling before Helen in her court furbelows, made a charming tableau.

“It is good acting, Tod,” I said in his ear.

He turned sharply. But instead of cuffing me into next week, he just sent his eyes straight out to mine.

“Do you call it acting?”

“I am sure it is. But not for you.”

“You are bold, Mr. Johnny.”

But I could tell by the subdued tone and the subdued manner, that his own doubts had been at last awakened whether or not it *was* acting.

Lady Whitney came sailing downstairs, a blaze of yellow satin; her face, with flurry, like a peony in full bloom. She could hardly say a word of thanks for the pearls, for her wits were gone a-woolgathering. When she was last at Court herself, Bill was a baby in long-clothes. We went out with them to the carriage, the lot of us; the lady's maid taking at least six minutes to settle the trains: and Bill said he hoped the eyes at the windows all round enjoyed the show. The postilion—an unusual sight in London—and the two men behind wore their state liveries of white and crimson; the bouquets in their breasts being bigger than full-blown cabbages.

“ You will dance with me the first dance to-night ? ” Tod whispered to Sophie Chalk, as they were going in after watching the carriage away.

Sophie made a slight pause for consideration, before she answered; and I saw her eyes wander out in the distance towards Bill Whitney.

“ Oh, thank you,” she said, with a great display of gratitude. “ But I think I am engaged.”

“ Engaged for the first dance ? ”

“ Yes. I am so sorry.”

“ The second, then ? ”

“ With the greatest pleasure.”

Anna heard it all as well as I. Tod gave Sophie's hand a squeeze to close the bargain, and went away whistling.

Not being in the world of fashion, we did not know how other people finished up drawing-room days (and when Helen Whitney went to Court they *were* drawing-rooms), but the Whitneys' programme was this: A cold collation in lieu of a dinner, when Fate should bring them home again, and a ball in the evening. The ball was our joint invention. Sitting round the school-room fire one night we settled it for ourselves: and after Sir John and my lady had stood out well, they gave in. Not that it would be much of a ball, for they had but few acquaintances in London and the house was small.

But now, had any aid been wanted by Miss Deveen to carry out her plans, she could not have devised better than this. For the Whitneys invited (all unconsciously) Mrs. Hughes to the ball. Anna came into Miss Deveen's after they had been sending out the invitations (only three days before the evening) and began telling her the names as a slice of gossip. She came to Mrs. Hughes. "Mrs. Hughes," interrupted Miss Deveen, "I am glad of that, Anna, for I want to see her."

Miss Deveen's seeing her would not go for much in the matter of elucidation; it was Mr. James who must see her; and the plan by

which he might do so was entirely Miss Deveen's own. She went down and arranged it with him, and before the night came, it was all cut and dried. He and she and I knew of it ; not another soul in the world.

"You will have to help me in it a little, Johnny," she said. "Be at hand to look out for Mr. James's arrival, and bring him up to me."

We saw them come back from the drawing-room between five and six, Helen with a bright colour in her cheeks ; and at eight o'clock we went in. London parties, which begin when you ought to be in your first sleep, are not understood by us country people, and eight was the hour named in the Whitneys' invitations. Cattledon was screwed into a rich sea-green satin (somebody else's once), with a water-lily in her thin hair ; and Miss Deveen wore all her diamonds. Sir John, out of his element and frightfully disconsolate, stood against the wall, his spectacles lodged on his old red nose. The thing was not in his line. Miss Deveen went up to shake hands.

"Sir John, I am rather expecting a gentleman to call on me on business to-night," she said ; "and have left word for him to step in and see me here. Will you pardon the liberty ?"

"I'm sure it's no liberty ; I shall be glad to welcome him," replied Sir John, dismally.

“There’ll be not much here but stupid boys and girls. We shall get no whist to-night. The plague only knows who invented balls.”

It was a little odd that, next to us, Mrs. Hughes should be the first to arrive. She was very pale and pretty, and her husband was a slender, quiet, delicate man, looking like a finished gentleman. Miss Deveen followed them with her eyes as they went up to Lady Whitney.

“She does not look like it, does she, Johnny?” whispered Miss Deveen. No, I was quite sure she did not.

Sophie Chalk was in white, with ivy leaves in her spangled hair, the sweetest fairy (to look at) ever seen out of a moonlight ring. Helen, in her Court dress and pearls, looked plain beside her. They stood talking together, not noticing that I and Tod were in the recess behind. The people had mostly come then, and the music was throwing out fits and starts. The rooms looked well; the flowers, scattered about them, had come up from Whitney Hall. Helen called to her brother.

“We may as well begin dancing, William.”

“Of course we may,” he answered. “I don’t know what we have waited for. I must get a partner. Miss Chalk, may I have the honour of dancing the first dance with you?”

That Miss Chalk’s eyes went up to his with a flash of gratitude, and then down in modesty

to the chalked floor, I knew as well as though they had been behind her head instead of before.

“Oh, thank you,” said she, “I shall be so happy.” And I no more dared glance at Tod than if he had been a springing crocodile. She had told *him* she was engaged for it.

But just as William was about to give her his arm, and somebody came and took away Helen, Lady Whitney called him. He spoke with his mother for a minute or two and came back with a cloud on his face.

“I am awfully sorry, Sophie. The mother says I must take out Lady Esther Starr this first time, old Starr’s wife, you know, as my father’s dancing days are over. Lady Esther is seven-and-thirty if she’s a day,” growled Bill, “and as big as a lighthouse. I’ll have the second with you, Sophie.”

“I am *afraid* I am engaged for the second,” hesitated Miss Sophie. “I think I have promised Joseph Todhetley.”

“Never mind him,” said Bill. “You’ll dance it with me, mind.”

“I can tell him I mistook the dance,” she softly suggested.

“Tell him anything. All right.”

He wheeled round, and went up to Lady Esther, putting on his glove. Sophie Chalk moved away, and I took the courage to glance sideways at Tod.

His face was white as death : I think with

passion. He stood with his arms folded, never moving throughout the whole of the quadrille, only looking out straight before him with a fixed stare. A waltz came next, for which they kept their partners. And Sophie Chalk had enjoyed the luck of sitting down all the time. When they were making ready for the second quadrille, Tod went up to her.

“This is our dance, Miss Chalk.”

Well, she had her share of brass. She looked steadily in his face, assuring him that he was mistaken, and vowing through thick and thin that it was the *third* dance she had promised to him. While she was excusing herself, Bill came up to claim her. Tod put out his strong arm to ward him off.

“Stay a moment, Whitney,” he said, with studied calmness, “let me have an understanding first with Miss Chalk. She can dance with you afterwards if she prefers to. Miss Chalk, *you know* that you promised yourself to me this morning for the second dance. I asked you for the first: you were engaged for that, you said, and would dance with me the second. There could be no mistake, on your side or on mine.”

“Oh, but *indeed* I understood it to be the third, dear Mr. Todhetley,” said she. “I am dreadfully sorry if it is my fault. I will dance the third with you.”

“I have not asked you for the *third*. Do

as you please. If you throw me over for this second dance, I will never ask you for another again as long as I live."

Bill Whitney stood by laughing; seeming to treat the whole as a good joke. Sophie Chalk looked at him appealingly.

"And you certainly promised *me*, Miss Chalk," he put in. "Todhetley, it is a complication. You and I had better draw friendly lots."

Tod bit his lip nearly to bleeding. All the notice he took of Bill's speech was to turn his back upon him, and address Sophie.

"The decision lies with you alone, Miss Chalk. You have engaged yourself to him and to me: choose between us."

She put her hand within Bill's arm, and went away with him, leaving a little honeyed flattery for Tod. But Bill Whitney looked back curiously into Tod's white face, all his lightness gone; for the first time he seemed to realize that it was serious, nearly an affair of life or death. His handkerchief up, wiping his damp brow, Tod did not notice which way he was going, and ran against Anna.

"I beg your pardon, child," he said, with a start, as if waking out of a dream. "Will you go through this dance with me, Anna?"

Yes. He led her up to it; and they took their places opposite to Bill and Miss Chalk.

Mr. James was to arrive at half-past nine.

I was waiting for him near the entrance door. He was punctual to time ; and looked very well in his evening dress. I took him up to Miss Deveen : she made room for him on the sofa by her side, her diamonds glistening. He must have seen their value. Sir John had his rubber then in the little breakfast-parlour : Miss Cattledon, old Starr, and another making it up for him. Wanting to see the play played out, I kept by the sofa.

This was not the dancing-room : but they came into it between the dances in couples, to march round in the cooler air. Mr. James looked and Miss Deveen looked ; and I confess that whenever Mrs. Hughes passed us, I felt queer. Miss Deveen suddenly arrested her and kept her talking for a minute or two. Not a word bearing upon the secret subject said Mr. James. Once, when the room was clear and the measured tread could be heard to the tune of one of the best waltzes ever imagined by Strauss, Lady Whitney approached. Catching sight of the strange gentleman by Miss Deveen, she supposed he had been brought by some of the guests, and came up to make his acquaintance.

“A friend of mine, dear Lady Whitney,” said Miss Deveen.

Lady Whitney, never observing that no name was mentioned, shook hands at once with Mr. James in her homely country fashion. He stood up until she had moved away.

“ Well ? ” said Miss Deveen to him, when the dancers were coming in again. “ Is the lady here ? ”

“ Yes.”

I had expected him to say No, and could have struck him for destroying my faith in Mrs. Hughes. She was passing at the same moment.

“ Do you see her now ? ” whispered Miss Deveen.

“ Not now. She was at the door a moment ago.”

“ Not now ! ” exclaimed Miss Deveen, staring at Mrs. Hughes. “ Is it not *that* lady ? ”

Mr. James sent his eyes in half a dozen directions at once. “ Which lady, ma’am ? ”

“ The one who has just passed in black silk, with the simple white net quilling round the neck.”

“ Oh dear, no ! ” said Mr. James. “ I never saw that lady in my life before. The lady, *the* lady, is dressed in white.”

Miss Deveen looked at him, and I looked. *Here*, in the rooms, and yet not Mrs. Hughes !

“ This is the one,” he whispered, “ coming in now.”

The one, turning in at that particular instant, was Sophie Chalk. But others were before her and behind her. She was on Harry Whitney’s arm.

“ Why don’t you dance, Miss Deveen ? ” asked bold Harry, halting before the sofa.

"Will you dance with me, Master Harry?"

"Of course I will. Glad to get you."

"Don't you tell fibs, young man. I might take you at your word, if I had my dancing shoes on."

Harry laughed. Sophie Chalk's blue eyes happened to rest on Mr. James's face: they took a puzzled expression, as if wondering where she had seen it. Mr. James rose and bowed to her. She must have recognized him then, for her features turned a livid white, in spite of the powder that covered them.

"Who is it, Johnny?" she whispered, in her confusion, loosing Harry's arm and coming behind.

"Well, you must ask that of Miss Deveen. He has come here to see her: something's up, I fancy, about those emerald studs."

Had it been to save my fortune, I could not have helped saying it. I saw it all as in a mirror. *She* it was who had taken them, and pledged them afterwards. The same light flashed on Miss Deveen. She followed her with her severe face, her condemning eyes.

"Take care, Johnny!" cried Miss Deveen.

I was just in time to catch Sophie Chalk. She would have fallen on my shoulder. The room was in a commotion at once: a young lady had fainted. Fainted! What from? asked everybody. Oh, from the heat, of course. And no other clue was breathed.

Mr. James's mission was over. It had been successful. He made a bow to Lady Whitney, and withdrew.

Miss Deveen sent in for Sophie Chalk the next day, and they had it out together, shut up alone. Sophie's coolness was good for any amount of denial, but it failed here. And then she took the other course, and fell on her knees at Miss Deveen's feet, and told a pitiable story of being alone in the world, without money to dress herself, and the open jewel-casket in Miss Deveen's chamber (into which accident, not design, had really taken her) proving too much in the moment's temptation. Miss Deveen believed it ; she told her the affair should never transpire beyond the two or three who already knew it ; that she would redeem the emeralds herself, and say nothing even to Lady Whitney ; but, as a matter of course, Miss Chalk must close her acquaintance with Sir John's family.

And, singular to say, Sophie received a letter from somebody that same evening, inviting her to go out of town. At least, she said she did.

So, the quitting the Whitneys suddenly was smoothly accounted for ; and Helen Whitney did not know the truth for many a day.

What did Tod think ? For that, I expect, is what you are all wanting to ask. That was another curious thing—that he and Bill Whit-

ney should have come to an explanation before the ball was over. Bill went up to him, saying that had he supposed Tod could mean anything serious in his admiration of Sophie Chalk, he should never have gone in for admiration of her himself, even in idleness ; and certainly would not continue to do so or spoil sport again.

“ Thank you for telling me,” answered Tod, with indifference. “ You are quite welcome to go in for Sophie Chalk in any way you please. *I have done with her.*”

“ No,” said Bill, “ good girls must get scarcer than they are before I should go in seriously for Sophie Chalk. She’s all very well to talk and laugh with, and she is uncommonly fascinating.”

It was my turn to put in a word then. “ As I told you, Bill, months ago, Sophie Chalk would fascinate the hair off your head, give her the chance.”

Bill laughed. “ Well, she has had the chance, Johnny : but she has not done it.”

Altogether, Sophie, thanks to her own bad play, had fallen to a discount.

When Miss Deveen announced to the world that she had found her emerald studs (lost through an accident, she discovered, and recovered in the same way) people were full of wonder at the chances and mistakes of life. Lettice Lane was cleared triumphantly. Miss Deveen sent her home for a week to shake

hands with her friends and enemies, and then took her back as her own maid.

And the only person I said a syllable to was Anna. I knew it would be safe; and I dare say you would have done the same in my place. But she stopped me at the middle of the first sentence.

“I have known it from the first, Johnny; I was nearly as sure of it as sure could be; and it is that that has made me so miserable.”

“Known it was Sophie Chalk?”

“As good as known it. There was no proof, only suspicion. And I could not see whether I ought to speak of the suspicion even to mamma, or to keep it to myself. As things have turned out, I am very thankful to have been silent.”

“How was it, then?”

“That night at Whitney Hall, after they had all come down from dressing, mamma sent me up to William’s room with a message. As I was leaving it—it is at the end of the long corridor, you know—I saw some one peep cautiously out of Miss Cattledon’s chamber, and then steal up the back stairs. It was Sophie Chalk. Later, when we were going to bed, and I was quite undressed, Helen, who was in bed, espied Sophie’s comb and brush on the table—for she had dressed in our room because of the large glass—and told me to run in with them: she only slept in the next room.

It was very cold. I knocked and entered so sharply that the door-bolt, a thin, creaky old thing, gave way. Of course I begged her pardon; but she seemed to start up in a terrible fear as if I had been a ghost. She had not touched her hair, but sat in her shawl, sewing at her stays; and she let them drop on the carpet and threw a petticoat upon them. I thought nothing, Johnny; nothing at all. But the next morning when the commotion arose that the studs were missing, I could not help recalling all this; and I quite hated myself for thinking Sophie Chalk might have been taking them when she stole out of Miss Cattledon's room, and was sewing them later into her stays."

" You thought right, you see."

" Johnny, I am very sorry for her. I wish we could help her to some good situation. Depend upon it, this will be a lesson: she will never so far forget herself again."

" She is quite able to take care of herself, Anna. Don't let it trouble you. I dare say she will marry Mr. Everty."

" Who is Mr. Everty?"

" Someone who is engaged in the wine business with Sophie Chalk's brother-in-law, Mr. Smith."

XVI.

GOING TO THE MOP.

“ I NEVER went to St. John’s mop in my life,” said Mrs. Todhetley.

“ That’s no reason why you never should go,” returned the Squire.

“ And never thought of engaging a servant at one.”

“ There are as good servants to be picked up in a mop as out of it ; and you get a great deal better choice,” said he. “ My mother has hired many a man and maid at the mop : first-rate servants too.”

“ Well, then, perhaps we had better go into Worcester to-morrow, and see,” concluded she, rather dubiously.

“ And start early,” said the Squire. “ What is it you are afraid of ? ” he added, catching at her doubtful tone. “ That good servants don’t put themselves into the mop to be hired ? ”

“ Not of that,” she answered. “ I know it is the only chance farm-house servants have of getting hired when they want to change their places. It was the noise and crowd I was thinking of.”

"Oh, that's nothing," returned the Pater.
"It is not half as bad as the fair."

Mrs. Todhetley stood at the parlour window of Dyke Manor, the autumn sun, setting in a glow, tinging her face and showing its thoughtful expression. The Squire was in his easy-chair, looking at one of the Worcester newspapers.

There had been a bother lately about the dairy-work. The old dairy-maid, four years in the service, had left to be married ; two others had been tried since, and neither suited. The last of them had marched herself off that day, after a desperate quarrel with Molly ; the house was pretty nearly at its wits' end in consequence, and perhaps the two cows were. Mrs. Todhetley, really not knowing what in the world to do, and fretting herself into the face-ache over it, was broken in upon by the Pater and his newspaper. He had just read in it the reminder that St. John's annual Michaelmas Mop would take place on the morrow : and he told Mrs. Todhetley that she could go there and hire a dairy-maid at will. Fifty if she wanted them. At that time the mop was as much of an institution as the fair or the wake. Some people called it the Statute Fair.

Molly, whose sweet temper you have had a glimpse or two of before, banged about among her spoons and saucepans when she heard what was in the wind. "Fine muck it 'ud be," she

said, “coming out o’ that there Worcester mop.” Having the dairy-work to do as well as her own just now, the house hardly held her.

We breakfasted early the next morning and started betimes in the large open carriage, the Squire driving his pair of fine horses, Bob and Blister. Mrs. Todhetley sat with him, and I behind. Tod might have gone if he would : but the long drive out and home had no charms for him, and he said ironically he should like to see himself attending the mop. It was a lovely morning, bright and sunny, with a suspicion of crispness in the air : the trees were putting on their autumn colours, and shoals of blackberries shone in the hedges.

Getting some refreshment again at Worcester, and leaving the Squire at the hotel, I and Mrs. Todhetley walked to the mop. It was held in the parish of St. John’s—which, as all the country knows, is a suburb of Worcester on the other side of the Severn. Crossing the bridge and getting well up the New Road, we plunged into the thick of the fun.

The men were first, standing back in a line on the foot-path, fronting the passers-by. Young rustics mostly, in clean smock-frocks, waiting to be looked at and questioned and hired, a broad grin on their faces with the novelty of the situation. We passed them : and came to the girls and women. You could tell they were nearly all rustic servants too, by their high

colours and awkward looks and manners. As a rule, each held a thick cotton umbrella, tied round the middle after the fashion of Mrs. Gamp's, and a pair of pattens whose bright rings showed they had not been in use that day. To judge by the look of the present weather, we were not likely to have rain for a month : but these simple people liked to guard against contingencies. Crowds of folks were passing along like ourselves, some come to hire, some only to take up the road and stare.

Mrs. Todhetley elbowed her way amidst them. So did I. She spoke to one or two, but nothing came of it. Whom should we come upon, to my intense surprise, but our dairy-maid—the one who had betaken herself off the previous day !

“ I hope you will get a better place than you had with me, Susan,” said the Mater, rather sarcastically.

“ I hopes as how I shall, missis,” was the insolent retort. “ ’Twon’t be hard to do, any way, that won’t, with that there overbearing Molly in your’n.”

We went on. A great hulking farmer as big as a giant, and looking as though he had taken more than was good for him in the morning, came lumbering along, pushing everybody right and left. He threw his bold eyes on one of the girls.

“ What place be for you, my lass ? ”

“None o’ yours, master,” was the prompt reply.

The voice was good-natured and pleasant, and I looked at the girl as the man went shouldering on. She wore a clean light cotton gown, a smart shawl all the colours of the rainbow, and a straw bonnet that could not be seen for sky-blue bows. Her face was fairer than most of the faces around ; her eyes were of the colour of her ribbons ; and her mouth, rather wide and always smiling, had about the nicest set of teeth I ever saw. To take likes and dislikes at first sight without rhyme or reason, is what I am hopelessly given to, and there’s no help for it. People laugh mockingly : as you have heard me say. “There goes Johnny with his fancies again !” they cry : but I know that it has served me well through life. I took a liking to this girl’s face : it was an honest face, as full of smiles as the bonnet was of bows. Mrs. Todhetley noticed her too, and halted. The girl dropped a curtsey.

“What place are you seeking ?” she asked.

“Dairy-maid’s, please, ma’am.”

The good Mater stood, dubious whether to pursue enquiries or to pass onwards. She liked the face of the girl, but did not like the profusion of blue ribbons.

“I understand my work well, ma’am, please ; and I’m not afraid of any much of it, in reason.”

This turned the scale. Mrs. Todhetley stood her ground and plunged into the proper questioning.

“Where have you been living?”

“At Mr. Thorpe’s farm, please, near Severn Stoke.”

“For how long?”

“Twelve months, please. I went there Old Michaelmas Day, last year.”

“Why are you leaving?”

“Please, ma’am”—a pause here—“please, I wanted a change, and the work was a great sight of it; frightful heavy; and missis often cross. Quite a herd o’ milkers, there was, there.”

“What is your name?”

“Grizzel Clay. I be healthy and strong, please ma’am; and I was twenty-two in the summer.”

“Can you have a character from Mrs. Thorpe?”

“Yes, please, ma’am, and a good one. She can’t say nothing against me.”

And so the queries went on; one would have thought the Mater was hiring a whole regiment of soldiers. Grizzel was ready and willing to enter on her place at once, if hired. Mrs. Thorpe was in Worcester that day, and might be seen at the Hare and Hounds inn.

“What do you think, Johnny?” whispered the Mater.

"I should hire her. She's just the girl I'd not mind taking without any character."

"With those blue bows! Don't be simple, Johnny. Still I like the girl, and may as well see Mrs. Thorpe."

"By the way, though," she added, turning to Grizzel, "what wages do you ask?"

"Eight pounds, please, ma'am," replied Grizzel, after some hesitation and with reddening cheeks.

"Eight pounds!" exclaimed Mrs. Todhetley. "That's very high."

"But you'll find me a good servant, ma'am."

We went back through the town to the Hare and Hounds, an inn near the cathedral. Mrs. Thorpe, a substantial dame in a long cloth skirt and black hat, by which we saw she had come in on horse-back, was at dinner.

She gave Grizzel Clay a good character. Saying the girl was honest, clean, hardworking, and very sweet tempered; and, in truth, she was rather sorry to part with her. Mrs. Todhetley asked about the blue bows. Ay, Mrs. Thorpe said, that was Grizzel Clay's great fault — a love of finery: and she recommended Mrs. Todhetley to "keep her under" in that respect. In going out, we found Grizzel waiting under the archway, having come down to learn her fate. Mrs. Todhetley said she should engage her, and bade her follow us to the hotel.

"It's an excellent character, Johnny," she said, as we went along the street. "I like everything about the girl, except the blue ribbons."

"I don't see any harm in blue ribbons. A girl looks nicer in ribbons than without."

"That's just it," said the Mater. "And this girl is good-looking enough to do without them. Johnny, if Mr. Todhetley has no objection, I think we had better take her back in the carriage. You won't mind her sitting with you?"

"Not I. And I'm sure I shall not mind the ribbons."

So it was arranged. The girl was engaged, to go back with us in the afternoon. Her box would be sent by the carrier. She presented herself at the Star at the time of starting with a small bundle: and a little birdcage, something like a mouse-trap, that had a bird in it.

"Could I be let take it, ma'am?" she asked of Mrs. Todhetley. "It's only a poor linnet that I found hurt on the ground the last morning I went out to help milk Thorpe's cows? I'm a-trying, please, to nurse it back to health."

"Take it, and welcome," cried the Squire. "The bird had better die, though, than be kept to live in that cage."

"I was thinking to let it fly, please, sir, when it's strong again."

Grizzel had proper notions. She screwed

herself into the corner of the seat, so as not to touch me. I heard all about her as we went along.

She had gone to live at her Uncle Clay's in Gloucestershire when her mother died, working for them as a servant. The uncle was "well-to-do," rented twenty acres of land, and had two cows and some sheep and pigs of his own. The aunt had a nephew, and this young man wanted to court her, Grizzel: but she'd have nothing to say to him. It made matters uncomfortable, and last year they turned her out: so she went and hired herself at Mrs. Thorpe's.

"Well, I should have thought you had better be married and have a home of your own than go out as dairy-maid, Grizzel."

"That depends upon who the husband is, sir," she said, laughing slightly. "I'd rather be a dairy-maid to the end o' my days—I'd rather be a prisoner in a cage like this poor bird—than have anything to say to that there nephew of aunt's. He had red hair, and I can't abide it."

Grizzel proved to be a good servant, and became a great favourite in the house, except with Molly. Molly, never taking to her kindly, was for quarrelling ten times a day, but the girl only laughed back again. She was superior to the general run of dairy-maids, both in looks and

manners : and her good-humoured face brought sweethearts up in plenty.

Two of them were serious. The one was George Roper, bailiff's man on a neighbouring farm ; the other was Sandy Lett, a wheelwright in business for himself at Church Dykely. Of course matters ran in this case, as they generally do run in such cases, all cross and contrary : or, as the French say, *à tort et à travers*. George Roper, a good-looking young fellow with curly hair and a handsome pair of black whiskers, had not a coin beyond the weekly stipend he worked for : he had not so much as a chair to sit in, or a turn-up bedstead to lie on ; yet Grizzel loved him with her whole heart. Sandy Lett, who was not bad-looking either, and had a good home and a good business, she did not care for. Of course the difficulty lay in deciding which of the two to choose : ambition and her friends recommended Sandy Lett ; imprudence and her own heart, George Roper. Like the donkey between the two bundles of hay, Grizzel was totally unable to decide on either, and kept both the swains on the tenter-hooks of suspense.

Sunday afternoons were the great trouble of Grizzel's life. Roper had holiday then, and came : and Lett, whose time was his own, though of course he could not afford to waste it on a week-day, also came. One would stand at the stile in one field, the other at a stile in

another field : and Grizzel, arrayed in one of the light print gowns she favoured, the many-coloured shawl, and the dangerous blue-ribboned bonnet; did not dare to go out to either, lest the other should pounce upon his rival, and a fight ensue. It was getting quite exciting in the household to watch the progress of events. The spring passed, the summer came round ; and between the two, Grizzel had her hands full. The other servants could not imagine what the men saw in her.

“ It is those blue ribbons she’s so fond of ! ” said Mrs. Todhetley to us two, with a sigh. “ I doubted them from the first.”

“ I should say it is the blue eyes,” dissented Tod.

“ And I the white teeth and laughing face. *Nobody* can help liking her.”

“ You shut up, Johnny. If I were Roper—”

“ Shut up, yourself, Joseph : both of you shut up : you know nothing about it,” interrupted the Squire, who had seemed to be asleep in his chair. “ It comes of woman’s coquetry and man’s folly. As to these two fellows, if Grizzel can’t make up her mind, I’ll warn them both to keep off my grounds at their peril.”

One evening during the midsummer holidays, in bounding out of the oak-walk to cross the fold-yard, I came upon Grizzel leaning on the gate. She had a bunch of sweet peas in her hand, and tears in her eyes. George Roper,

who must have been talking to her, passed me quickly, touching his hat.

“Good evening, sir.”

“Good evening, Roper.”

He walked away with his firm, quick stride : a well-made, handsome, and trustworthy fellow. His brown velveteen coat (an old one of his master’s) was shabby, but he looked well in it ; and his gaitered legs were straight and strong. That he had been the donor of the sweet peas, a rustic lover’s favourite offering, was evident. Grizzel attempted to hide them inside her gown when she saw me, but was not quick enough, so she was fain to hold them in her hand openly, and make believe to be busy with her tin milk-pail.

“It’s a drop o’ skim milk I’ve got over ; I was going to take it to the pigs,” said she.

“What are you crying about ?”

“Me crying !” returned Grizzel. “It’s the red sun a shinin’ in my eyes, sir.”

Was it ! “Look here, Grizzel, why don’t you put an end to this state of bother ? You won’t be able to milk the cows next.”

“Tain’t any in’ard bother o’ that sort as ’ll keep me from doing my proper work,” returned she, with a flick to the handle of the can.

“At any rate, you can’t marry two men : you would be taken up by old Jones the constable, you know, and tried for bigamy. And I’m sure you must keep *them* on the ferment. George

Roper's gone off with a queer look on his face. Take him, or dismiss him."

"I'd take him to-morrow, but for one thing," avowed the girl in a half whisper.

"His short wages, I suppose—sixteen shillings a week."

"Sixteen shillings a week short wages!" echoed Grizzel. "I call 'em good wages, sir. I'd never be afraid of getting along on them with a steady man—and Roper's that. It ain't the wages, Master Johnny. It is, that I promised mother never to begin life upon less than a cottage and some things in it."

"How do you mean?"

"Poor mother was a-dying, sir. Her illness lasted her many a week, and she might be said to be a-dying all the time. I was eighteen then. 'Grizzy,' says she to me one night, 'you be a likely girl and 'll get chose afore you be many summers older. But you must promise me that you'll not, on no temptation whatsoever, say yes to a man till he has got a home of his own to take you to, and beds and tables and things comfortable about him. Once begin without 'em, and you and him 'll spend all your after life looking out for 'em; but they'll not come any the more for that. And you'll be at sixes and sevens always: and him, why perhaps he'll take to the beer-shop—for many a man does, through having, so to say, no home. I've seen the ill of it in my days,' she says, 'and if I

thought you'd tumble into it I'd hardly rest quiet in the grave where you be so soon a-going to place me.' 'Be at ease, mother,' says I to her in answer, 'and take my promise, which I'll never break, not to set-up for marriage without a home o' my own and proper things in it.' That promise I can't break, Master Johnny; and there has laid the root of the trouble all along."

I saw then. Roper had nothing but a lodgin', not a stick or stone that he could call his. And the foolish man, instead of saving up out of his wages, spent the remnant in buying pretty things for Grizzel. It was a hopeless case.

"You should never have had anything to say to Roper, knowing this, Grizzel."

Grizzel twirled the sweet peas round and round in her fingers, and looked foolish, answering nothing.

"Lett has a good home to give you and means to keep it going. He must make a couple of pounds a week. Perhaps more."

"But then I don't care for him, Master Johnny."

"Give him up then. Send him about his business."

One would have thought she was counting the blossoms on the sweet-pea stalks. Presently she spoke, without looking up.

"You see, Master Johnny, one does not like to—to lose all one's chances and grow into an old maid. And, if I *can't* have Roper, perhaps

—in time—I might bring myself to take Lett. It's a better opportunity than a poor dairy-maid like me could ever ha' looked for."

The cat was out of the bag. Grizzel was keeping Lett on for a remote contingency. When she could make up her mind to say No to Roper, she meant to say Yes to him.

"It is awful treachery to Roper; keeping him on only to drop him at last," ran my thoughts. "Were I he, I should give her a good shaking, and leave ——"

A sudden movement on Grizzel's part nearly startled me. Catching up her can, she darted across the yard by the pond as fast as her pattens would go, poured the milk into the pigs' trough with a dash, and disappeared indoors. Looking round for any possible cause for this, I caught sight of a man in light fustian clothes hovering about in the near field by the hayricks. It was Sandy Lett; he had walked over on the chance of getting to see her. But she did not come out again.

The next move in the drama was made by Lett. The following Monday he presented himself before the Squire—dressed in his Sunday-going things, and a new hat on—to ask him to be so good as to settle the matter, for it was "getting a'most beyond him."

"Why, how can I settle it?" demanded the Squire. "What have I to do with it?"

"It's a-tormenting of me pretty nigh into

fiddle-strings," pleaded Lett. "What with her caprices—for sometimes her speaks to me as pleasant as a angel, while at others her won't speak nohow; and what with dratted folk over yonder a-teasing of me"—jerking his head in the direction of Church Dykely—"I don't get no peace of my life. It be a shame, Squire, for any woman to treat a man as she's a-treating me."

"I can't make her have you if she won't have you," exploded the Squire, not liking the appeal. "It is said, you know, that she would rather have Roper."

Sandy Lett, who had a great idea of his own merits, turned his nose into the air. "Beg pardon, Squire," he said, "but that won't wash, that won't. Grizzel couldn't have nothing serious to say to that there Roper; nought but a day-labourer on a farm; *she couldn't*: and if he don't keep his distance from her, I'll wring his ugly head round for him. Look at me beside him!—at my good home wi' its m'hogany furniture in't. I can keep her a'most like a lady. She may have in a wench once a week for the washing and scrubbing, if she likes: I'd not deny her nothing in reason. And for that there Roper to think to put hisself in atween us! No; 'twon't do: the moon's not made o' green cheese. Grizzel's a bit light-hearted, sir; fond o' chatter; and Roper he've played upon that. But if you'd speak a word

for me, Squire, so as I may have the banns put up——”

“ What the deuce, Lett, do you suppose I have to do with my women servants and their banns ? ” testily interrupted the Squire. “ I can’t interfere to make her marry you. But I’ll tell you thus much, and her too : if there is to be this perpetual uproar about Grizzel, she shall quit my house before the twelvemonth she engaged herself for is up. And that’s a disgrace for any young woman.”

So Sandy Lett got nothing by coming, poor unfortunate man. And yet—in a sense he did. The Squire ordered the girl before him, and told her in a sharp, decisive tone that she must either put an end to the state of things—or leave his service. And Grizzel, finding that the limit of toleration had come, but unable in her conflicting difficulties of mind to decide which of the swains to retain and which discard, dismissed the two. After that, she was plunged over head and ears in distress, and for a week could not see to skim off the cream for her tears.

“ This comes of hiring dairy wenches at a statty fair ! ” cried wrathful Molly.

The summer went on. August was waning. One morning that Mr. Duffham had called in and was helping Mrs. Todhetley to give Lena a

spoonful of jam (with a powder in it), at which Lena kicked and screamed, Grizzel ran into the room in excitement so great, that they thought she was going into a fit.

“ Why, what is it ? ” questioned Mrs. Todhetley, putting a temporary truce to the jam hostilities. “ Has either of the cows kicked you down, Grizzel ? ”

“ I’m—I’m come into a fortin ! ” shrieked Grizzel hysterically, laughing and crying in the same breath.

Mr. Duffham put her into a chair, angrily ordering her to be calm—for anger is the best remedy in the world to apply to hysterics—and took a letter from her that she held out. It told her that her uncle Clay was dead, and had left her a bequest of forty pounds. The forty pounds to be paid to her in gold whenever she should go and apply for it. This letter had come by the morning’s post: but Grizzel, busy in her dairy, had only just now opened it.

“ For the poor old uncle to have died in June, and them never to ha’ let me hear on’t ! ” she said, sobbing. “ Just like ‘em ! And me never to have put on a bit o’ mourning for him ! ”

She rose from the chair, drying her eyes with her apron, and held out her hand for the letter. As Mrs. Todhetley began to say she was very glad to hear of her good luck, a shy look and a half-smile came into the girl’s face.

“ I can get the home now, ma’am, with all this fortin,” she softly whispered.

Molly banged her pans about worse than ever, partly in envy at the good luck of the girl, partly because she had to do the dairy work during Grizzel’s absence in Gloucestershire: a day and a half, which was given her by Mrs. Todhetley.

“ There won’t be no standing a nigh her and her finery now,” cried rampant Molly to the servants. “ She’ll tack her blue ribbons on to her tail as well as her head. Lucky if the dairy some fine day ain’t found turned all sour ! ”

Grizzel came back in time; bringing her forty pounds in gold wrapped-up at the foot of a folded stocking. The girl had as much sense as here and there one, and a day or two after her arrival she asked leave to speak to her mistress. It was to say that she should like to leave at the end of her year, Michaelmas, if her mistress would please look out for some one to replace her.

“ And what are you going to do, Grizzel, when you do leave? What are your plans? ”

Grizzel turned the colour of a whole corn-field of poppies, and confessed that she was going to be married to George Roper.

“ Oh,” said Mrs. Todhetley. But she had nothing to urge against it.

“ And please, ma’am,” cried Grizzel, the

poppies deepening and glowing, "we'd like to make bold to ask if the master would let to us that bit of a cottage that the Claytons have went out of."

The Mater was quite taken aback. It seemed indeed that Grizzel had been laying her plans to some purpose.

"It have got a nice piece o' ground to grow pertaters and garden stuff, and it have got a pigsty," said Grizzel. "Please, ma'am, we shall get along famous, if we can have that."

"Do you mean to set up a pig, Grizzel?"

Grizzel's face was all one smile. Of course they did. With such a fortune as she had come into, she intended herself and her husband to have everything good about them, including a pig.

"I'll give Grizzel away," wrote Tod when he heard the news of the legacy and the projected marriage. "It will be fun! And if you people at home don't present her with her wedding gown it will be a stingy shame. Let it have a good share of blue bows."

"No, though, will he!" exclaimed Grizzel with sparkling eyes, when told of the honour designed her by Tod. "Give me away! Him! I've always said there's not such another gentleman in these parts as Mr. Joseph."

The banns were put up, and matters progressed smoothly; with one solitary exception. When Sandy Lett heard of the treason going

on behind his back, he was ready to drop with blighted love and mortification. A three-days' weather blight was nothing to his. Quite forgetting modesty, he made his fierce way into the house, without saying with your leave or by your leave, and thence to the dairy where Grizzel stood making-up butter, startling the girl so much with his white face and wild eyes that she stepped back into a pan of cream. Then he enlarged upon her iniquity, and wound up by assuring her that neither she nor her "coward of a Roper" could ever come to good. After that, he let her alone, making no further stir.

Grizzel quitted the Manor and went into the cottage, which the Squire had agreed to let to them : Roper was to come to it on the wedding-day. A daughter of Goody Picker's, one Mary Standish (whose husband had a habit of going off on roving trips and staying in them until found and brought back by the parish), stayed with Grizzel, helping her to get the cottage in habitable order, and arrange in it the articles she bought. That sum of forty pounds seemed to be doing wonders : I told Grizzel I could not have made a thousand go as far.

"Any left, Master Johnny, why of course I shall have plenty left," she said. "After buying the bed and the set o' drawers and the chairs and tables ; and the pots and pans and crockeryware for the kitchen ; and the pig and

a cock and hen or two; and perviding a joint of roast pork and some best tea and white sugar for the wedding day, we shall still have pounds and pounds on't left. 'Tisn't me, sir, nor George nether, that 'ud like to lavish away all we've got and put none by for a rainy day."

"All right, Grizzel. I am going to give you a tea-caddy."

"Well now, to think of that, Master Johnny!" she said, lifting her hands. "And after the mistress giving me such a handsome gownd!—and the servants clubbing together, and bringing a roasting oven and beautiful set o' flat irons. Roper and me 'll be set up like a king and queen."

On Saturday, the day before that fixed for the wedding, I and Tod were passing the cottage—a kind of miniature barn, to look at, with a thatched roof, and a broken grindstone at the door—and went in: rather to the discomfiture of Grizzel and Mrs. Standish, who had their petticoats short and their arms bare, scouring and scrubbing and making ready for the morrow. Returning across the fields later, we saw Grizzel at the door, gazing out all ways at once.

"Consulting the stars as to whether it will be fine to-morrow, Grizzel?" cried Tod, who was never at a loss for a ready word.

"I was a-looking out for Mary Standish,

sir," she said. " George Roper haven't been here to-night, and we be all at doubtings about several matters he was to have come in to settle. First he said he'd go on betimes to the church o' Sunday morning ; then he said he'd come here and we'd all walk together : and it was left at a uncertainty. There's the blackberry pie, too, that he've not brought."

" The blackberry pie ! " said I.

" One that Mrs. Dodd, where he lodges, have made a present of to us for dinner, Master Johnny. Roper was to ha' brought it in to-night ready. It won't look well to see him carrying of a baked-pie on a Sunday morning, when he've got on his wedding coat. I can't think where he have got to ! "

At this moment, some one was seen moving towards us across the field path. It proved to be Mary Standish: her gown turned up over her head, and a pie in her hands the size of a pulpit canopy. Red syrup was running down the outside of the dish, and the crust looked a little black at the edges.

" My, what a big beauty ! " exclaimed Grizzel.

" Do take it, Grizzel, for my hands be all a cramped with its weight," said Mrs. Standish : who, as it turned out, had been over to Roper's lodgings, a mile and a half away, with a view of seeing what had become of the bridegroom elect. And she nearly threw the pie into Grizzel's arms, and took down her gown.

" And what do Roper say ? " asked Grizzel.
" And why have he not been here ? "

" Roper's not at home, " said Mary Standish.
" He come in from work about six ; washed
and put hisself to rights a bit, and then went
out with a big bundle. Mrs. Dodd called after
him to bring the pie, but he called back again
that the pie might wait. "

" What was in the bundle ? " questioned
Grizzel, resenting the slight shown to the pie.

" Well, by the looks on't, Mother Dodd
thought 'twas his working clothes packed up, "
replied Mary Standish.

" His working clothes ! " cried Grizzel.

" A going to take 'em to the tailor's, maybe,
to get 'em done up. And not afore they
wanted it. "

" Why, it's spending money for nothing, "
was Grizzel's comment. " I could ha' done
up them clothes. "

" Well, it's what Mother Dodd thought, "
concluded Mary Standish.

We said good night, and went racing home,
leaving the two women at the door, Grizzel
lodging the heavy blackberry pie on the old
grindstone.

It was a glorious day for Grizzel's wedding.
The hour fixed by the clerk (old Bumford) was
ten o'clock, so that it might be got well over
before the bell rang out for service. We

reached the church early. Amidst the few spectators already there was cross-grained Molly, pocketing her ill-temper and for once meaning to be gracious to Grizzel.

Ten o'clock struck, and the big old clock went ticking on. Clerk Bumford (a pompous man when free from gout) began abusing the wedding party for not keeping its time. The quarter past was striking when Grizzel came up, with Mary Standish and a young girl. She looked white and nervous, and not at all at ease in her bridal attire—a green gown of some kind of stuff, and no end of pink ribbons : the choice of colours being Grizzel's own.

“Is Roper here yet?” whispered Mary Standish.
“Not yet.”

“It's too bad of him!” she continued.
“Never to send a body word whether he meant to call for us, or not: and us a waiting there till now, expecting of him.”

But where was George Roper? And (as old Bumford asked) what did he mean by it? The clergyman in his surplice and hood looked out at the vestry twice, as if questioning what the delay meant. We stood just inside the porch, and Grizzel grew whiter and whiter.

“Just a few minutes more o' this delay, and there won't be no wedding at all this blessed morning,” announced clerk Bumford aloud for the public benefit. “George Roper wants a good blowing up, he do.”

Ere the words were well spoken, a young man named Dicker, who was a fellow lodger of Roper's and was to have accompanied him to church, made his appearance alone. That something had gone wrong was plain to be seen: but, what with the publicity of his present position, and what with the stern clerk pouncing down upon him in wrath, the young man could hardly get his news out.

In the first place, Roper had never been at home all night; never been seen, in short, since he had left Mrs. Dodd's with the bundle, as related by Mary Standish. That morning, while Dicker in his consternation knew not what to be at—whether to be off to church alone, or to wait still, in the hope that Roper would come—two notes were delivered at Mrs. Dodd's by a strange boy: the one addressed to himself, John Dicker, the other to "Miss Clay," meaning Grizzel. They bore ill news; George Roper had given up his marriage, and gone away for good.

At this extraordinary crisis, pompous Clerk Bumford was so taken aback, that he could only open his mouth and stare. It gave Dicker the opportunity to put a few words in.

"What we thought at Mother Dodd's was, that Roper had took a drop too much somewhere last evening, and couldn't get home. He's as sober a man as can be—but what ever else was we to think? And when this writed

note come this morning, and we found he had gone off to Ameriky o' purpose to avoid being married, we was downright floundered. This is yours, Grizzel," added the young man in as gently considerate a tone as any gentleman could have used.

Grizzel's hand shook as she took the letter he held out. She was biting her pale lips hard to keep down emotion. "Take it and read it," she whispered to Mary Standish—for in truth she herself could not, with all that sea of curious eyes upon her.

But Mary Standish laboured under the slight disadvantage of not being able to read writing: conscious of this difficulty, she would not touch the letter. Mr. Bumford, his senses and his tongue returning together, snatched it without ceremony out of Grizzel's hand.

"I'll read it," said he. And he did so. And I, Johnny Ludlow, give you the copy verbatim.

"Der Grisl, saterdy evenin, this comes hoppin you be wel as it leves me at presint, Which this is to declar to you der grisl that our marage is at an end, it hav ben to much for me and praid on my sperits, I cant stand it no longer nohow and hav took my leve of you for ivir, Der Grisl I maks my best way this night to Livirpol to tak ship for Ameriky, and my last hops for you hearby xprest is as you may be hapy with ananother, I were niver worthey of you der grisl and thats a fac, but I

kep it from you til now when I cant kep it no longer cause of my conshunse, once youv red this hear letter dont you nivir think no mor on me agen, which I shant on you, Adew for ivir,

“ your unfortnit frend George Roper.

“ Ide av carred acores that ther blakbured pi but shoud have ben to late, my good hops is youl injoy the pi with another better nor you ivir could along with me, best furwel wishes to Mary Standish, G R.”

What with the penmanship and what with the spelling, it took old Bumford's spectacles some time to get through. A thunderbolt could hardly have made more stir than this news. Nobody spoke, however; and Mr. Bumford folded the letter in silence.

“ I always knowed what that there Roper was worth,” broke forth Molly. “ He pipe-clayed my best black cloak on the sly one day when I ordered him off the premises. You be better without him, Grizzel girl—and here's my hand and wishing you better luck in token of it.”

“ Mrs. Dodd was right—them was a change o' clothes he was a taking with him to Ameriky,” added Mary Standish.

“ Roper's a jail-bird, I should say,” put in old Bumford. “ A nice un too.”

“ But what can it be that's went wrong—what is it that have took him off?” wondered the young man, Dicker.

The parson in his surplice had come along

the aisle and was standing to listen. Grizzel, in the very extremity of mental bitterness and confusion, but striving to put a good face of indifference on the matter before the public, gazed around helplessly.

“I’m better without him, as Molly says—and what do I care?” she cried recklessly, her lips and face quivering. The parson put his hand gravely on her arm.

“My good young woman, I think you are in truth better without him. Such a man as that is not worthy of a regret.”

“No, sir, and I don’t and won’t regret him,” was her rapid answer, the voice rising hysterically.

As she turned, intending to leave the church, she came face to face with Sandy Lett. I had seen him standing there, drinking in the words of the note with all his ears and taking covert looks at Grizzel.

“Don’t pass me by, Grizzel,” said he. “I feel hearty sorry for all this, and I hope that villain ’ll come to be drownded on his way to Ameriky. Let me be your friend. I’ll make you a good one.”

“Thank you,” she answered. “Please let me go by.”

“Look here, Grizzel,” he rejoined with a start, as if some thought had at that moment occurred to him. “Why shouldn’t you and me make it up together? Now. If the one

bridegroom's been a wicked runagate, and left you all forsaken, you see another here ready to put on his shoes. Do, Grizzel, do ! ”

“ Do what ? ” she asked, not catching his meaning.

“ Let's be married, Grizzel. You and me. There's the parson and Mr. Bumford all ready, and we can get it over afore church begins. It's a good home I've got to take you to. Don't say nay, my girl.”

Now what should Grizzel do ? Like the lone lorn widow in “ David Copperfield,” who, when a ship's carpenter offered her marriage, “ instead of saying ‘ Thank you, sir, I'd rather not,’ up with a bucket of water and dashed it over him,” Grizzel “ up ” with her hand and dealt Mr. Sandy a sounding smack on the side of his left cheek. Smarting under the infliction, Sandy Lett gave vent to a word or two of passion, out of place in a church, and the parson administered a reprimand.

Grizzel had not waited. Before the sound of her hand had died away, she was outside the door, quickly traversing the lonely church-yard. A fine end to poor Grizzel's wedding !

The following day, Monday, Mrs. Todhetley went over to the cottage. Grizzel, sitting with her hands before her, started up, and made believe to be desperately busy with some tea-cups. We were all sorry for her.

“ Mr. Todhetley has been making inquiry

into this business, Grizzel," said the Mater, "and it certainly seems more mysterious than ever, for he cannot hear a word against Roper. His late master says Roper was the best servant he ever had; he is as sorry to lose him as can be."

"Oh, ma'am, but he's not worth troubling about—my thanks and duty to the master all the same."

"Would you mind letting me see Roper's note?"

Grizzel took it out of the tea-caddy I had given her—which caddy was to have been kept for show. Mrs. Todhetley, mastering the contents, and biting her lips to suppress an occasional smile, sat in thought.

"I suppose this is Roper's own handwriting, Grizzel?"

"Oh ma'am, it's his, safe enough. Not that I ever saw him write. He talks about the blackberry pie, you see; one might know it is his by that."

"Then, judging by what he says here, he must have got into some bad conduct, or trouble, I think, which he has been clever enough to keep from you and the world."

"Oh yes, that's it," said Grizzel. "Poor mother used to say one might be deceived in a saint."

"Well, it's a pity but he had given some clue to its nature: it would have been a sort

of satisfaction. But now—I chiefly came over to ask you, Grizzel, what you purpose to do ? ”

“ There’s only one thing for me now, ma’am,” returned poor crest-fallen Grizzel, after a pause : “ I must get another place.”

“ Will you come back to the Manor ? ”

A hesitation—a struggle—and then she flung her apron up to her face and burst into tears. Dairy-maids have their feelings as well as their betters, and Grizzel’s “ lines ” were very bitter just then. She had been so proud of this poor cottage home ; she had grown to love it so only in those few days of occupancy, and to look forward to years of happiness within it in their humble way : and now to find that she must give it up and go to service again !

“ The Squire says he will consider it as though you and Roper had not taken the cottage ; and he thinks he can find somebody to rent it who will buy the furniture of you—that is, if you prefer to sell it,” she resumed very kindly. “ And I think you had better come back to us, Grizzel. The new maid in your place does not suit at all.”

Grizzel took down her apron and rubbed her eyes. “ It’s very good of you, ma’am—and of the master—and I’d like to come back but for one thing. I’m afraid Molly would let me have no peace in my life : she’d get tanking at me about Roper before the others. Perhaps I’d hardly be able to stand it.”

"I will talk to her," said Mrs. Todhetley, rising to go. "Where is Mary Standish to-day?"

"Gone over to Alcester, ma'am. She had a errand there she said. But I think it was only to tell her folks the tale of my trouble."

Molly had her "talking to" at once. It put her out a little: for she was really feeling some pity for Grizzel, and did not at all intend to "get tanking" at her. Molly had once experienced a similar disappointment herself; and her heart was opening to Grizzel. After her dinner was served that evening, she ran over to the cottage, in her coarse cooking apron and without a bonnet.

"Look here," she said, bursting in upon Grizzel, sitting alone in the dusk. "You come back to your place if you like—the missis says she has given you the option—and don't you be afeard of me. 'Tisn't me as'll ever give back to you a word about Roper; and, mind, when I says a thing I mean it."

"Thank you, Molly," humbly replied poor Grizzel, catching up her breath.

"The sooner you come back the better," continued Molly, fiercely. "For it's not me and that wench we've got now as is going to stop together. I had to call the missis into the dairy this blessed morning, and show her the state it was in. So you'll come back, Grizzel—and we'll be glad to see you."

Grizzel nodded her head: her heart was too full to speak.

“ And as to that false villain of a Roper, as could serve a woman such a pitiful trick, I only wish I had the doctoring of him ! He should get a—a—a——” Molly’s voice, pitched in a high tone, died gradually away. What on earth was it, stepping in upon them ? Some most extraordinary object, who opened the door softly, and came in with a pitch. Molly peered at it in the darkness with open mouth.

A cry from Grizzel. A cry half of terror, half of pain. For she had recognized the object to be a man, and George Roper. George Roper with his hair and handsome whiskers cut off, and white sleeves in his brown coat—so that he looked like a Merry Andrew.

He seemed three parts stupefied : not at all like a traveller in condition to set off to America. Sinking down in the nearest wooden chair, he stared at Grizzel in a dazed way, and spoke in a slow, questioning, wondering voice.

“ I can’t think what it is that’s the matter with me.”

“ Where be your black whiskers—and your hair ? ” burst forth Molly.

The man gazed at her for a minute or two, taking in the question ; he then raised his trembling hand to either side his face—feeling for the whiskers that were no longer there.

“ A nice pot o’ mischief *you’ve* been a get-

ting into !” cried sharp Molly. “ Is that your own coat ? What’s gone of the sleeves ? ”

For, now that the coat could be seen closely, it turned out that its sleeves had been cut out, leaving the bare white sleeves of the shirt underneath. Roper looked first at one arm, then at the other.

“ What part of Ameriky be ye bound for, and when do the ship sail ? ” pursued sarcastic Molly.

The man opened his mouth and closed it again ; like, as Molly put it, a born natural. Grizzel suddenly clung to him with a sobbing cry.

“ He is ill, Molly ; he’s ill. He has had some trick played on him. George, what be it ? ” But still George Roper only gazed about him as if too stupid to understand.

In short, the man *was* stupid. That is, he had been stupefied, and as yet was only partially recovering the effects. He remembered going into the barber’s shop on Saturday night to have his hair cut, after leaving his bundle of clothes at the tailor’s. Some ale was served round at the barber’s, and he, Roper, took a glass. After that he remembered nothing : all was blank, until he woke up an hour ago in the unused shed at the back of the blacksmith’s shop.

That the ale had been badly drugged, was evident. The question arose—who had played the trick ? In a day or two, when Roper had recovered, an inquiry was set on foot : but

nothing came of it. The barber testified that Roper seemed sleepy after the ale, and a joke went round that he must have been drinking some previously. He went out of the shop without having his hair cut, with several more men—and that was all the barber knew. Of course Sandy Lett was suspected. People said he had done it in hopes to get himself substituted for the bridegroom. Lett, however, vowed through thick and thin that he was innocent; and nothing was traced home to him. Neither was the hand-writing of the note.

They were married on the Thursday. Grizzel was too glad to get him back unharmed to make bones over the cut whiskers. No difficulty was made about opening the church on a week-day. Clerk Bumford grumbled at it, but the parson put him down. And the blackberry pie served still for the wedding dinner.

XVII.

BREAKING DOWN.

“ HAVE him here a bit.”

“ Oh ! But would you like it ? ”

“ Like it ? ” retorted the Squire. “ I know this : if I were a hard-worked London clerk, ill for want of change and rest, and I had friends living in a nice part of the country, I should feel it uncommonly hard if they did not invite me.”

“ I’m sure it is very kind of you to think of it,” said Mrs. Todhetley.

“ Write at once and ask him,” said the Squire.

They were speaking of a Mr. Marks. He was a relation of Mrs. Todhetley’s ; a second or third cousin. She had not seen him since she was a girl, when he had used sometimes to come and stay at her father’s. He seemed not to have got on very well in life : was only a clerk on a narrow salary, was married and had some children. A letter now and then passed between them and Mrs. Todhetley, but no other acquaintanceship had been kept up. About a month before this, Mrs. Todhetley had written

to ask how they were going on ; and the wife in answering—for it was she who wrote—said her husband was killing himself with work, and she quite believed he would break down for good unless he had a rest.

We heard more about it later. James Marks was clerk in a great financial house—Brown and Co. Not particularly great as to reputation, for they made no noise in the world, but great as to their transactions. They did a little banking in a small way, and had mysterious money dealings with no end of foreign places : but if you had gone into their counting-house in London you'd have seen nothing to show for it, save Mr. Brown seated at a table-desk in a small room, and half a dozen clerks, or so, writing hard or bending over columns of figures, in a bigger one. Mr. Brown was an elderly little gentleman in a chestnut wig, and the “Co.” existed only in name.

James Marks had been thrown on the world when he was seventeen, with a good education, good principles, and a great anxiety to get on in life. He had to do it ; for he had only himself to look to—and, mind you, I have lived long enough to learn that that's not at all the worst thing a young man can have. When some friends of his late father's got him into Brown and Co.'s house, James Marks thought his fortune was made. That is, he thought he was placed in a position to work up to one. But no.

Here he was, getting on for forty years of age, and with no more prospect of fortune, or competence either, than he had at the beginning.

How many clerks, and especially bankers' clerks, are there in that City of London now who could say the same ! Who went into their house (whatsoever it may be) in the hey-day of their youth, exulting in their good luck in having obtained the admission for which so many others were striving. They saw not the long years of toil before them, the weary days of close work, with no rest or intermission, save Sunday ; they saw not the struggle to live and pay ; they saw not themselves middle-aged men, with a wife and family, hardly able to keep the wolf from the door. It was James Marks' case. He had married. And what with having to keep up the appearance of gentlepeople (at least to make a pretence at it) and to live in a decent-looking dwelling, and to buy clothes, and to pay doctors' bills and children's schooling, I'll leave you to guess how much he had left for luxuries out of his two hundred a year.

When expenses were coming upon him thick and fast, Marks sought out some night employment. A tradesman in the neighbourhood—which was Pimlico—a butter and cheeseman doing a flourishing business, advertised for a book-keeper to attend two or three hours in the evening. James Marks presented himself and was engaged. It had to be done in a kind of secrecy,

lest offence should be taken at head quarters. Had the little man in the chestnut wig heard of it, he might have objected to his clerk keeping any books but his own. Shut up in the cheese-monger's small back closet that he called his counting-house, Mr. Marks could be as private as need be. So there he was ! After coming home from his day's toil, instead of taking needful recreation, the home-sitting with his wife, or the stroll in the summer weather, in place of throwing work to the winds and giving his brain rest, James Marks, after snatching a meal, tea and supper combined, went forth to work again, to weary his eyes with more figures and his head with casting them up. He generally managed to get home by eleven except on Saturday; but the day's work was too much for any man. Better for him (could he have pocketed pride, and gained over Brown and Co.) that he had hired himself to stand behind the evening counter and serve out the butter and cheese to the customers. It would at least have been a relief from the accounts. And so the years had gone on.

A portion of the wife's letter to Mrs. Todhetley had run as follows: "Thank you very much for your kind inquiries after my husband, and for your hope that he is not overworking himself. *He is.* But I suppose I must have said something about it in my last letter (I am ashamed to remember that it was written two

years ago !) that induced you to refer to it. That he is overworking himself I have known for a long while ; and things that he has said lately have tended to alarm me. He speaks of sometimes getting confused in the head. In the midst of a close calculation he will suddenly seem to lose himself—lose memory and figures and all, and then he has to leave off for some minutes, hide his eyes, and keep perfectly still, or else leave his stool and take a few turns up and down the room. Another thing he mentions—that the figures dance before his eyes in bed at night, and he is adding them up in his brain as if it were daytime and reality. It is very evident to me that he wants change and rest."

" And what a foolish fellow he must have been not to take it before this !" cried the Squire, commenting on parts of the letter, while Mrs. Todhetley wrote.

" Perhaps that is what he has not been able to do, sir," I said.

" Not able ! Why, what d'ye mean, Johnny ? "

" It is very difficult for a banker's clerk to get holiday. Their work has to go on all the same."

" Difficult ! when a man's powers are breaking down ! D'ye think bankers are made of flint and steel, not to give their clerks holiday when it is needed ? Don't you talk nonsense, Johnny Ludlow."

But I was not so far wrong, after all. There came a letter of warm thanks from Mr. Marks

himself in answer to Mrs. Todhetley's invitation. He said how much he should have liked to accept it and what great good it would certainly have done him; but that upon applying for leave he found he could not be spared. So there seemed to be an end of it; and we hoped he would get better without the rest, and rub on as other clerks have to rub on. But in less than a month he wrote again, saying he would come if the Squire and Mrs. Todhetley were still pleased to have him. He had been so much worse as to be obliged to tell Mr. Brown the truth—that he believed he *must* have rest; and Mr. Brown granted it to him.

It was the Wednesday in Passion Week, and a fine spring day, when James Marks arrived at Dyke Manor. Easter was late that year. He was rather a tall man, with dark eyes and very thin hair; he wore spectacles, and at first was rather shy in manner.

You should have seen his delight in the change. The walks he took, the enjoyment of what he called the sweet country. "Oh," he said one day to us, "yours must be the happiest lot on earth! No forced work; your living assured; nothing to do but to revel in this health-giving air! Forgive my freedom, Mr. Todhetley," he added a moment after, "I was contrasting your lot with my own."

We were passing through the fields towards the Court: the Squire was taking him to see

the Sterlings, and he had said he would rather walk than drive. The hedges were spreading into green: the grass on either side was yellow with buttercups and cowslips. This was on the Monday. The sun shone and the breeze was soft. Mr. Marks sniffed the air as he went along.

“ Six months of this would make a new man of me,” we heard him say to himself in a low tone.

“ Take it,” cried the Squire.

Mr. Marks laughed, sadly enough. “ You might as well tell me, sir, to—to take heaven,” he said, impulsively. “ The one is no more in my power than the other.—Oh hark ! I do believe that’s the cuckoo !”

We stood still to listen. It was the cuckoo, sure enough, for the first time that spring. It only gave out two or three notes, though, and then was silent.

“ How many years it is since I heard the cuckoo !” he exclaimed, brushing his hand across his eyes. “ More than twenty, I suppose. It seems to bring back my youth to me. What a thing it would be for us, sir, if we could only go into the mill that grinds people young again !”

The Squire laughed. “ It is good of *you* to talk of age, Marks ; why, I must be nearly double yours,” he added—which of course was but random speaking.

“ I feel old, Mr. Todhetley: perhaps older than you do. Think of the difference in our mode of life. I, tied down to a desk for more hours of the twenty-four than I care to think of, my brain ever at work; you, revelling in this beautiful, healthy freedom !”

“ Ay, well, it is a difference, when you come to think of it,” said the Squire, soberly.

“ I must not repine,” returned Marks. “ There are more men in my case than in yours. No doubt it is well for me,” he continued, dropping his voice, with a sigh. “ Were your favoured lot mine, sir, I might find so much good in it as to forget that this world is not our true home.”

Perhaps it had never struck the Squire before how much he was to be envied; but Marks put it strongly. “ You’d find crosses and cares enough in my place, I can tell you, Marks, of one sort or another. Johnny, here, knows how I am bothered sometimes.”

“ No doubt of it,” replied Marks, with a smile. “ No lot on earth can be free from its duties and responsibilities; and they must of necessity entail care. That is one thing, Mr. Todhetley; but to be working away your life at steam point—and to know that you are working it away—is another.”

“ You acknowledge, then, that you are working too hard, Marks,” said the Squire.

“ I know I am, sir. But there’s no help for it.”

“It is a pity.”

“Why it should begin to tell upon me so early I don’t know. There are other men, numbers of them, who work as long and hard as I do, and are seemingly none the worse for it.”

“The time will come though when they will be, I presume.”

“As surely as that sun is shining in the sky.”

“Possibly you have been more anxious than they, Marks.”

“It may be so. My conscience has always been in my work, to do it very efficiently. I fear, too, I am rather sensitively organised as to nerves and brain: upon those who are so, I fancy work tells faster than on others.”

The Squire put his arm within Marks’. “You must have a bit of a struggle to get along, too, on your small salary.”

“True: and it all helps. Work and struggle together are not the most desirable combination. But for being obliged to increase my means by some stratagem or other, I should not have taken on the additional evening’s work.”

“How long are you at it, now, of an evening?”

“Usually about two hours. On Saturdays and at Christmas-time longer.”

“And I suppose you must continue this night work?”

"Yes. I get fifty pounds a year for it. And I assure you I should not know how to spare one pound of the fifty. No one knows the expenses of children, save those who have to look at every shilling before it can be spent."

There was a pause. Mr. Marks stooped, plucked a cowslip, and held it to his lips.

"Don't you think, Marks," resumed the Squire, in a confidential, friendly tone, "that you were just a little imprudent to marry?"

"No, I do not think I was," he replied slowly, as if considering the question. "I did not marry very early: I was eight-and-twenty; and I had got together the wherewithal to furnish a house, and something in hand besides. The question was mooted among us at Brown's the other day—whether it was wiser, or not, for young clerks to marry. There is a great deal to be urged both ways—against marrying and against remaining single."

"What can you urge against remaining single?"

"A very great deal, sir. I feel sure, Mr. Todhetley, that you can form no idea of the miserable temptations that beset a young fellow in London. Quite half the London clerks, perhaps more, have no home to go to when their day is over; I mean no parent's home. A solitary room and nobody to bear them company in it; that's all they have: perhaps, in addition, a crabbed landlady. Can you blame them very

much if they go out and escape this solitude?—they are at the age, you know, when enjoyment is most keen; the thirst for it well-nigh irrepressible ——”

“ And then they go off to those disreputable singing places ! ” exploded the Squire, not allowing him to finish.

“ Singing places, yes; and other places. Theatres, concerts, supper-rooms—oh, I cannot tell you a tithe of the temptation that meets them at every turn and corner. Many and many a poor young fellow, well-intentioned in the main, has been ruined both in pocket and in health by these snares; led into them at first by dangerous companions.”

“ Surely all do not get led away.”

“ Not all. Some strive on manfully, remembering early precepts and taking God for their guide, and so escape. But it is not the greater portion who do this. Some marry early, and secure themselves a home. Which is best? —I put the question only in a worldly point of view. To commit the imprudence of marrying, and so bring on themselves and wives intolerable perplexity and care: or to waste their substance in riotous living ? ”

“ I’ll be shot if I know ! ” cried the Squire, taking off his hat to rub his puzzled head. “ It’s a sad thing for poor little children to be pinched, and for men like you to be obliged to work yourselves to shatters to keep them.

But as to those others, I'd give' em all a night at the treadmill. Johnny! Johnny Ludlow!"

"Yes, sir."

"You may be thankful that *you* don't live in London."

I had been thinking to myself that I was thankful not to be one of those poor young clerks to have no home to go to when work was over. Some fellows would rather tramp up and down the muddy streets than sit alone in a solitary room; and the streets, according to Marks, teemed with temptations. He resumed.

"In my case I judged it the reverse of imprudence to marry, for my wife expected a fairly good fortune. She was an only child, and her father had realized enough to live quietly; say three or four hundred a year. Mr. Stockleigh had been a member of the Stock Exchange, but his health failed and he retired. Neither I nor his daughter ever doubted—no, nor did he himself—that this money must come to us in time."

"And won't it?" cried the Squire.

Marks shook his head. "I fear not. A designing servant, that they had, got over him after his daughter left—he was weak in health and weak in mind—and he married her. Caroline—my wife—resented it naturally; there was some bickering on either side, and since then they have closed the door against

her and me. So you see, with no prospect before us, there's nothing for me but to work the harder," he concluded, with a kind of plucked-up cheerfulness.

"But, to do that, you should get up your health and strength, Marks. You must, you know. What would you do if you broke down?"

"Hush!" came the involuntary and almost affrighted answer. "Don't remind me of it, sir: sometimes I dream of it, and cannot bear to awake."

We had got to like Marks very much only in those few days. He was a gentleman in mind and manners, and a pleasant one into the bargain, though he did pass his days adding up figures and was kept down by poverty. The Squire meant to keep him for a month: two months if he would stay.

On the following morning, Tuesday, during breakfast-time, a letter came for him by the post—the first he had had. He had told his wife she need not write to him, wanting to have all the time for idle enjoyment: not to spend it in answering letters.

"From home, James?" asked Mrs. Todhetley.

"No," said he, smiling. "It is only a reminder that I am due to-morrow at the house."

"What house?" cried the Squire.

"Our house, sir. Brown and Co.'s."

The Squire put down his buttered roll—for Molly had graciously sent in hot rolls that morning—and stared at the speaker.

"What on earth are you talking of?" he cried. "You don't mean to say you are thinking of going back?"

"Indeed I am—unfortunately. I must get up to London to-night."

"Why, bless my heart and mind," cried the Squire, getting up and standing a bit, "you've not been here a week!"

"It is all the leave I could get, Mr. Todhetley: a week. I thought you understood that."

"You can't go away till you are cured," roared the Squire. "Why didn't you go back the day you came? Don't you talk nonsense, Marks."

"Indeed I should like to stay longer," he earnestly said. "I wish I could. Don't you see, Mr. Todhetley, that it does not lie with me?"

"Do you dare to look me in the face, Marks, and tell me this one week's rest has cured you? Come! What on earth!—are you turning silly?"

"It has done me a great, great deal of good——"

"It has not, Marks. It can't have done it; not real good," came the Squire's interruption. "One would think you were a child."

“It was with difficulty I obtained this one week’s leave,” he explained. “I am really required in the office; my absence from it I know causes trouble. This holiday has done so much for me that I shall go back with a good heart.”

“Look here,” said the Squire: “suppose you take French leave, and stay?”

“In that case my discharge would doubtless arrive by the first post.”

“Look here again: suppose in a month or two you break down and have to leave? What then?”

“Brown and Co. would appoint a fresh clerk in my place.”

“Why don’t Brown and Co. keep another clerk or two, so as to work you all less?”

Marks smiled at the very idea. “That would increase their expenses, Mr. Todhetley. They will never do that. It is a part of the business of Brown’s life to keep expenses down.”

Well, Marks had to go. The Squire was very serious in thinking more rest absolutely needful—of what service *could* a week be, he reiterated. Down he sat, wrote a letter to Brown and Co., telling them his opinion, and requesting the favour of their despatching James Marks back for a longer holiday. This he sent by post, and they would get it in the morning.

“No, I’ll not trust it to you, Marks,” he

said ; " you might never deliver it. Catch an old bird with chaff!"

To this letter there came no answer at all ; and Mr. Marks did not come back. The Squire relieved his mind by calling Brown and Co. thieves and wretches—and so it passed. It must be remembered that I am writing of past years, when holidays were not so universal for any class, clerk or master, as they are at present. Not that I am aware whether financiers' clerks get them now.

The next scene in the drama I can only tell by hearsay. It took place in London where I was not.

It was a dull, rainy day in February, and Mrs. Marks sat in her parlour in Pimlico. The house was one of a long row, and the parlour just about large enough to turn in. She sat by the fire, nursing a little two-year-old girl, and thinking ; and three other children, the eldest a boy of nine, were playing at the table—building houses on the red cloth with little wooden bricks. Mrs. Marks was a sensible woman, understanding proper management, and had taken care to bring up her children not to be troublesome. She looked about thirty, and must have been pretty once, but her face was faded now, her grey eyes had a sad look in them. The chatter at the

table and the bricks fell alike unheeded on her ear.

“Mamma, will it soon be tea-time?”

There was no answer.

“Didn’t you hear, mamma? Carry asked if it would soon be tea-time. What were you thinking about?”

She heard this time, and started out of her reverie. “Very soon now, Willy dear. Thinking? Oh, I was thinking about your papa.”

Her thoughts were by no means bright ones. That her husband’s health and powers were alike failing, she felt as sure of as though she could foresee the ending that was soon to come. How he went on and did his work was a marvel: but he could not give it up, or bread would fail.

The week’s rest in the country had set Mr. Marks up for some months. Until the next autumn he worked on better than he had been able to do for some time past. And then he failed again. There was no particular failing outwardly, but he felt all too conscious that his over-taxed brain was getting worse than it had ever been. He struggled on; making no sign. That he should have to resign part of his work was a fact inevitable: he must give up the evening book-keeping to enable him to keep his more important place. “Once let me get the Christmas work over,” thought he, “and as soon as may be in the New Year, I will resign.”

He got the Christmas work over. Very heavy

it was, at both places, and nearly did for him. It is the last feather, you know, that breaks the camel's back: and that work broke James Marks. Towards the end of January he was laid up in bed with a violent cold that settled on his chest. Brown and Co. had to do without him for eleven days: a calamity that—so far as Marks was concerned—had never happened in Brown and Co.'s experience. Then he went back to the City again, feeling shaken and dazed; but the evening labour was perforce given up.

No one knew how ill he was: or, to speak more correctly, how unfit for his work, how more incapable of it he was growing day by day. His wife suspected a little. She knew of his sleepless nights, the result of over-taxed nerves and brain, when he would toss and turn and get up and walk the room; and dress himself in the morning without having slept.

“There are times,” he said to her in a kind of horror, “when I cannot at all collect my thoughts. I am as long again at my work as I used to be, and have to go over it again and again. There have been one or two mistakes, and old Brown asks what is coming to me. I can't help it. The figures whirl before me, and I lose my power of mind.”

“If you could but sleep well!” said Mrs. Marks.

“ Ay, if I could. The brain is as much at work at night as day. There are the figures mentally before me, and there am I, adding them up.”

“ You should see a clever physician, James. Spare the guinea, and go. It may be more than the guinea saved.”

Mr. Marks took the advice. He went to a clever doctor ; explained his position, the kind of work he had to do, and described his symptoms. “ Can I be cured ? ” he asked.

“ Oh yes, I think so,” said the doctor, cheerfully, without telling him that he had gone on so far as to make it rather a doubt. “ The necessary treatment is very simple. Take change of scene and perfect rest.”

“ For how long ? ”

“ Twelve months, at least.”

“ Twelve months ! ” repeated Marks, in a queer tone.

“ At least. It is a case of absolute necessity. I will write you a prescription for a tonic. You must live *well*. You have not lived well enough for the work you have to do.”

As James Marks went out into the street he could have laughed a laugh of bitter mockery. Twelve months’ rest for *him* ? The doctor had told him one thing—that had he taken the rest in time, a very, very much shorter period would have sufficed. “ I wonder how many poor men there are like myself in London at this moment,”

he thought, "who want this rest and cannot take it, and who ought to live better and cannot afford to do it!"

It was altogether so very hopeless that he did nothing, except take the tonic, and he continued to go to the City as usual. Some two or three weeks had elapsed since then: he of course growing worse, though there was nothing to show it outwardly: and this was the end of February, and Mrs. Marks sat thinking of it all over the fire, what she knew, and guessing at what she did not know, and her children were building houses at the table.

The servant came in with the tea-things, and took the little girl. Only one servant could be kept—and hardly that. Mrs. Marks had made her own tea and was pouring out the children's milk-and-water, when they heard a cab drive up and stop at the door. A minute after Mr. Marks entered, leaning on the arm of one of his fellow clerks.

"Here, Mrs. Marks, I have brought you an invalid," said the latter gaily, making light of it for her sake. "He seems better now. I don't think there's much the matter with him."

Had it come? Had what she had been dreading come—that he was going to have an illness, she wondered. But she was a trump of a wife, and showed herself calm and comforting.

"You shall both of you have some tea at

once," she said, cheerfully. "Willy, run and get more tea-cups."

It appeared that Mr. Marks had been, as the clerk expressed it, very queer that day; more so than usual. He could not do his work at all; had to get assistance continually from one or the other, and ended by falling off his stool on the floor, in what he called, afterwards, a "sensation of giddy bewilderment." He seemed fit for nothing, and Mr. Brown said he had better be taken home.

That day ended James Marks' work. He had broken down. At night he told his wife what the physician had said; which he had not done before. She could scarcely hide her dismay.

A twelvemonth's rest for him! What would become of them? Failing his salary, they would have no means whatever of living.

"Oh, if my father had but acted by us as he ought!" she mentally cried. "James could have taken rest in time then, and all would have been well. Will he help us now it has come to this? Will *she* let him?—for it is she who holds him in subjection and steals his heart against us."

Mr. Stockleigh, the father, lived at Sydenham. She, the new wife, had taken him off there from his residence in Pimlico as soon as might be after the marriage; and the daughter had never been invited inside the house. Bu

she resolved to go there now. Saying nothing to her husband, Mrs. Marks started for Sydenham the day after he was brought home ill, and found the place without trouble.

The wife, formerly the cook, was a big brawny woman with a cheek and a tongue of her own. When Mrs. Marks was shown in, she forgot herself in the surprise; old habits prevailed, and she dropped a curtsey.

“I wish to see papa, Mrs. Stockleigh.”

“Mr. Stockleigh’s out, ma’am.”

“Then I must wait until he returns.”

Mrs. Stockleigh did not see her way clear to turn this lady from the house, though she would have liked to do it. She made a show of hospitality, and ordered wine and cake to be put on the table. Of which wine, Mrs. Marks noticed with surprise, she drank *four* glasses. “Now and then we used to suspect her of drinking in the kitchen!” ran through Mrs. Marks’ thoughts. “Has it grown upon her?”

The garden gate opened, and Mr. Stockleigh came through it. He was so bowed and broken that his daughter scarcely knew him. She hastened out and met him in the path.

“Caroline!” he exclaimed in amazement. “Is it really you? How much you have changed!”

“I came down to speak to you, papa. May we stay and talk here in the garden?”

He seemed glad to see her, rather than not,

and sat down with her on the garden bench in the sun. In a quiet voice she told him all: and asked him to help her. Mrs. Stockleigh had come out and stood listening to the treason, somewhat unsteady in her walk.

“I—I would help you if I could, Caroline,” he said, in hesitation, glancing at his wife.

“Yes, but you can’t, Stockleigh,” she put in. “Our own expenses is as much as iver we can manage, Mrs. Marks. It’s a orful cost, living out here, and our two servants is the very deuce for extravagance. I’ve changed ‘em both ten times for others, and the last lot is always worse nor the first.”

“Papa, do you see our position?” resumed Mrs. Marks, after hearing the lady patiently. “It will be a long time before James is able to do anything again—if he ever is—and we have not been able to save money. What are we to do? Go to the workhouse? I have four little children.”

“You know that you can’t help, Stockleigh,” insisted Mr. Stockleigh’s lady, taking up the answer, her face growing more inflamed. “You’ve not got the means to do anything: and there’s an end on’t.”

“It is true, Caroline; I’m afraid I have not,” he said—and his daughter saw with pain how tremblingly subject he was to his wife. “I seem short of money always. How did you come down, my dear?”

"By the train, papa. Third class."

"Oh dear!" cried Mr. Stockleigh. "My health's broken, Caroline. It is, indeed, and my spirit too. I am sure I am very sorry for you. Will you come in and take some dinner?"

"We've not got nothing but a bit of 'ashed beef," cried Mrs. Stockleigh, as if to put a damper upon the invitation. "Him and me fails in our appetites dreadful: I can't think what's come to 'em."

Mrs. Marks declined the dinner: she had to get back to the children. That any kind of pleading would be useless while that woman held the sway, she saw well. "Good bye, papa," she said. "I suppose we must do the best we can alone. Good morning, Mrs. Stockleigh."

To her surprise her father kissed her; kissed her with quivering lips. "I will open the gate for you, my dear," he said, hastening on to it. As she was going through, he slipped a sovereign into her hand.

"It will pay for your journey, at least, my dear. I am sorry to hear of your travelling third class. Ah, times have changed. It is not that I won't help you, child, but that I can't. She goes up to receive the dividends, and keeps me short. I should not have had that sovereign now, but it is the change out of the spirit bill that she sent me to pay. Hush! the money goes in drink. She drinks like any

fish. Ah, Caroline, I was a fool—a fool ! Fare you well, my dear."

"Fare *you* well, dear papa, and thank you," she answered, turning away with brimming eyes and an aching heart.

After resting for some days and getting no better, James Marks had to give it up as a bad job. He went to the City house, saw Mr. Brown, and told him.

"Broken down!" cried old Brown, hitching back his wig, as he always did when put out. "I never heard of such nonsense. At your age! The thing's incomprehensible."

"The work has been very wearing to the brain, sir; and my application to it was close. During the three-and-twenty years I have been with you I never had but one week's holiday: the one last spring."

"You told me then you felt like a man breaking down, as if you were good for nothing," resentfully spoke old Brown.

"Yes, sir. I told you that I believed I was breaking down for want of a rest," replied Marks. "It has proved so."

"Why, you had your rest."

"One week, sir. I said I feared it would not be of much use. But—it was not convenient for you to allow me more."

"Of course it was not convenient; you know it could not be convenient," retorted old Brown. "D'ye think I keep my clerks for play, Marks ?

D'ye suppose my business will get done of itself?"

"I was aware myself, sir, how inconvenient my absence would be, and therefore I did not press the matter. That one week's rest did me a wonderful deal of service: it enabled me to go on until now."

Old Brown looked at him. "See here, Marks —we are sorry to lose you: suppose you take another week's change now, and try what it will do. A fortnight, say. Go to the sea-side, or somewhere."

Marks shook his head. "Too late, sir. The doctors tell me it will be twelve months before I am able to work again at calculations."

"Oh, my service to you," cried Mr. Brown. "Why, what are you going to do if you cannot work?"

"That is a great deal more than I can say, sir. The thought of it is troubling my brain quite as much as work ever did. It is never out of it, night or day."

For once in his screwy life, old Brown was generous. He told Mr. Marks to draw his salary up to the day he had left, and he added ten pounds to it over and above.

During that visit I paid to Miss Deveen's in London, when Tod was with the Whitneys,

and Helen made her first curtsey to the Queen, and we discovered the mal-doings of that syren, Mademoiselle Sophie Chalk, I saw Marks. Mrs. Todhetley had given me two or three commissions, as may be remembered: one amidst them was to call in Pimlico, and see how Marks was getting on.

Accordingly I went. We had heard nothing, you must understand, of what I have told above, and did not know but he was still in his situation. It was a showery day in April: just a twelvemonth, by the way, since his visit to us at Dyke Manor. I found the house out readily; it was near to Ebury Street; and knocked. A young lad opened the door, and asked me to walk in the parlour.

“ You are Mr. Marks’ son,” I said, rubbing my feet on the mat: “ I can tell by the likeness. What’s your name? ”

“ William. Papa’s is James.”

“ Yes, I know.”

“ He is ill,” whispered the lad, with his hand on the parlour door-handle. “ Mamma’s downstairs, making him some arrowroot.”

Well, I think you might have knocked me down with a feather when I knew him—for at first I did not. He was sitting in an easy chair by the fire, dressed, but wrapped round with blankets: and instead of being the James Marks we had known, he was like a living skeleton, with cheek-bones and hollow eyes.

But he was glad to see me, smiled, and held out his hand from the blanket.

It is uncommonly awkward for a young fellow to be taken unawares like this. You don't know what to say. I'm sure I as much thought he was dying as I ever thought anything in this world. At last I managed to stammer a word or two about being sorry to see him so ill.

"Ay," said he, in a weak, panting voice, "I am different from what I was when with your kind people, Johnny. The trouble I foresaw then has come."

"You used sometimes to feel then as though you would not long keep up," was my answer, for really I could find nothing else to say.

He nodded. "Yes, I felt that I was breaking down—that I should inevitably break down unless I could have rest. I went on until February, Johnny, and then it came. I had to give up my situation; and since then I have been dangerously ill from another source—the chest and lungs."

"I did not know your lungs were weak, Mr. Marks."

"I'm sure I did not," he said, after a bad fit of coughing. "I had one attack in January through catching a cold. Then I caught another cold, and you see the result: the doctor hardly saved me. I never was subject to take cold before. I suppose the fact is that when a man breaks down in one way he gets weak

in all, and is more liable to other ailments.”

“I hope you will get better as the warm weather comes on. We shall soon have it here.”

“Better of this cough, perhaps: I don’t know: but not better yet of my true illness that I think most of—the over-taxed nerves and brain. Oh, if I could but have taken a sufficient rest in time!”

“Mr. Todhetley said you ought to have stayed with us for three months. He says it often still.”

“I believe,” he said, solemnly lifting his hand, “that if I could have had entire rest then for two or three months, it would have set me up for life. Heaven hears me say it.”

And what a dreadful thing it now seemed that he had not!

“I don’t repine. My lot seems a hard one, and I sometimes feel sick and weary when I dwell upon it. I have tried to do my duty: I could but keep on and work, as God knows. There was no other course open to me.”

I supposed there was not.

“I am no worse off than many others, Johnny. There are men breaking down every day through incessant application and lack of needful interludes of rest. Well for them if their hearts don’t break with it!”

And, to judge by the tone he spoke in, it was as much as to say that his heart had broken.

"I am beginning to dwell less on it now," he went on. "Perhaps it is that I am too weak to feel so keenly. Or that Christ's words are being indeed realized to me: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' God does not forsake us in our trouble, Johnny; once we have learnt to turn to Him."

Mrs. Marks came into the room with the cup of arrowroot. The boy had run down to tell her I was there. She was very pleasant and cheerful: you could be at home with her at once. While he was waiting for the arrowroot to cool, he leant back in his chair and dropped into a doze.

"It must have been a frightful cold that he caught," I whispered to her.

"It was caught the day he went into the City to tell Mr. Brown he must give up his situation," she answered. "There's an old saying, of being Penny wise and pound foolish, and that's what poor James was that day. It was a fine morning when he started; but the rain set in, and when he left Mr. Brown it was pouring, and the streets were wet. He ought to have taken a cab, but did not, and waited for an omnibus. The first that passed was full; by the time another came he had got wet and his feet were soaking. That brought on a return of the illness he had had in January."

"I hope he will get well."

"It lies with God," she answered.

They made me promise to go again. "Soon Johnny, soon," said Mr. Marks in a kind of eagerness that was suggestive. "Come in the afternoon and haye some tea with me."

I had meant to obey literally and go in a day or two; but one thing or other kept intervening, and a week or ten days passed. One Wednesday Miss Deveen was engaged to a dinner-party, and I took the opportunity of going to Pimlico. It was a stormy afternoon, blowing great guns one minute, pouring cats and dogs the next. Mrs. Marks was alone in the parlour, the tea-things on the table before her.

"We thought you had forgotten us," she said in a half whisper, shaking hands. "But this is the best time you could have come; for a kind neighbour has invited all the children in for the evening and we shall be quiet. James is worse."

"Worse!"

"At least, weaker. He cannot sit up long now without great fatigne. He lay down on the bed an hour ago and has dropped asleep," she added, indicating the next room. "I am waiting for him to awake before I make the tea."

He awoke then: the cough betrayed it. She went into the room, and presently he came back with her. No doubt he was worse! my heart

sank at seeing him. If he had looked like a skeleton before, he was like a skeleton's ghost now.

“Ah, Johnny! I knew you would come.”

I told him how it was I had not been able to come before, going into the details. It seemed to amuse him to hear of the engagements, and I described Helen Whitney's Court dress as well as I could—and Lady Whitney's—and the servants' great bouquets—and the ball at night. He ate one bit of thin toast and drank three cups of tea. Mrs. Marks said he was always thirsty.

After tea he had a most violent fit of coughing and thought he must lie down to rest for a bit. Mrs. Marks came back and sat with me.

“I hope he will get well,” I could not help saying to her.

She shook her head. “I fear he has not much hope of it himself,” she answered. “Only yesterday I heard him tell Willy—that—that God would take care of them when he was gone.”

She could hardly speak the last words, and broke down with a sob. I wished I had not said anything.

“He has great trust, but things trouble him very much,” she resumed. “Nothing else can be expected, for he knows that our means are nearly spent.”

“It must trouble you also, Mrs. Marks.”

" I seem to have so much to trouble me that I dare not dwell upon it. I pray not to, every hour in the day. If I gave way, what would become of them ? "

At dark she lighted the candles and drew down the blinds. Just after that, there came a most tremendous knock at the front-door, loud and long.

" Naughty children ! " she exclaimed. " It must be they."

" I'll go ; don't you stir, Mrs. Marks."

I opened the door, and a rush of wind and rain seemed to blow in an old gentleman. He never said a word to me, but went banging into the parlour and sank down on a chair out of breath.

" Papa ! " exclaimed Mrs. Marks. " Papa ! "

" Wait till I get up my speech, my dear," said the old gentleman. " She is gone."

" Who is gone ? " cried Mrs. Marks.

" *She*. I don't want to say too much against her now she's gone, Caroline ; but she *is* gone. She had a bad fall downstairs in a tipsy fit some days ago, striking her head on the flags, and the doctors could do nothing for her. She died this morning, poor soul ; and I am coming to live with you and James, if you will have me. We shall all be so comfortable together, my dear."

Perhaps Mrs. Marks remembered at once what it implied—that the pressure of poverty

was suddenly lifted and she and those dear ones would be at ease for the future. She bent her head in her hands for a minute or two, keeping silence.

“Your husband shall have rest now, my dear, and all that he needs. So will you, Caroline.”

It had come too late. James Marks died in May.

It was about three or four years afterwards that we saw the death of Mr. Brown in the *Times*. The newspapers made a flourish of trumpets over him ; saying he had died worth two hundred thousand pounds.

“There must be something wrong somewhere, Johnny,” remarked the Squire, in a puzzle. “I should not like to die worth all that money, and know that I had worked my clerks to the bone to get it together. I wonder how he will like meeting poor Marks in the next world ?”

XVIII.

REALITY OR DELUSION ?

THIS is a ghost story. Every word of it is true. And I don't mind confessing that for ages afterwards some of us did not care to pass the spot alone at night. Some people do not care to pass it yet.

It was autumn, and we were at Crabb Cot. Lena had been ailing; and in October Mrs. Todhetley proposed to the Squire that they should remove with her there, to see if the change would do her good.

We Worcestershire people call North Crabb a village; but one might count the houses in it, little and great, and not find four-and-twenty. South Crabb, half a mile off, is ever so much larger; but the church and school are at North Crabb.

John Ferrar had been employed by Squire Todhetley as a kind of over-looker of the estate, or working bailiff. He had died the previous winter; leaving nothing behind him except some debts; for he was not provident; and his handsome son Daniel. Daniel Ferrar, who

was rather superior as far as education went, disliked work : he used to make a show of helping his father, but it came to little. Old Ferrar had not put him to any trade or particular occupation ; and Daniel, who was as proud as Lucifer, would not turn to it himself. He liked to be a gentleman. All he did now was to work in his garden, and feed his fowls, ducks, rabbits, and pigeons, of which he kept a great quantity, selling them to the houses around and sending them to market.

But, as everybody said, poultry would not maintain him. Mrs. Lease, in the pretty cottage hard by Ferrar's, grew tired of saying it. This Mrs. Lease and her daughter, Maria, must not be confounded with Lease the pointsman : they were in a better condition of life, and not related to him. Daniel Ferrar used to run in and out of their house at will when a boy, and he was now engaged to be married to Maria. She would have a little money, and the Leases were respected in North Crabb. People began to whisper a query of how Ferrar got his corn for the poultry : he was not known to buy much : and he would have to go out of his house at Christmas, for the owner of it, Mr. Coney, had given him notice. Mrs. Lease, anxious about Maria's prospects, asked Daniel what he intended to do then, and he answered, " Make his fortune : he should begin to do it as soon as he could turn himself round." But

the time was going on, and the turning round seemed to be as far off as ever.

After Midsummer, a niece of the school-mistress's, Miss Timmens, had come to the school to stay: her name was Harriet Roe. The father, Humphrey Roe, was the half-brother of Miss Timmens. He had married a French woman, and lived more in France than in England until his death. The girl had been christened Henriette; but North Crabb, not understanding French, converted it into Harriet. She was a showy, free-mannered, good-looking girl, and made speedy acquaintance with Daniel Ferrar; or he with her. They improved upon it so rapidly that Maria Lease grew jealous, and North Crabb began to say he cared for Harriet more than for Maria. When Tod and I got home the latter end of October, to spend the Squire's birthday, things were in this state. James Hill, the bailiff who had been taken on by the Squire in John Ferrar's place (but a far inferior man to Ferrar; not much better, in fact, than a common workman, and of whose doings you will hear soon in regard to his little step-son, David Garth) gave us the account of matters in general. Daniel Ferrar had been drinking lately, Hill added, and his head was not strong enough to stand it; and he was also beginning to look as if he had some care upon him.

“A nice lot, he, for them two women to be

fighting for," cried Hill, who was no friend to Ferrar. "There'll be mischief between 'em if they don't draw in a bit. Maria Lease is next door to mad over it, I know; and t'other, finding herself the best liked, crows over her. It's something like the Bible story of Leah and Rachel, young gents; Dan Ferrar likes the one, and he's bound by law of promise to the t'other. As to the French jade," concluded Hill, giving his head a toss, "she'd make a show of liking any man that followed her, she would; a dozen of 'em on a string."

It was all very well for surly Hill to call Daniel Ferrar a "nice lot," but he was the best-looking fellow in church on Sunday morning—well-dressed too. But his colour seemed brighter; and his hands shook as they were raised, often, to push back his hair, that the sun shone in upon through the south window, turning it to gold. He scarcely looked up, not even at Harriet Roe, with her dark eyes roving everywhere, and her streaming pink ribbons. Maria Lease was pale, quiet, and nice, as usual; she had no beauty, but her face was sensible, and her deep grey eyes had a strange and curious earnestness. The new parson preached, a young man just appointed to the parish of Crabb. He went in for great observance of Saints' days, and told his congregation that he should expect to see them at church on the morrow, which would be the Feast of All Saints.

Daniel Ferrar walked home with Mrs. Lease and Maria after service, and was invited to dinner. I ran across to shake hands with the old dame, who had once nursed me through an illness, and promised to look in and see her later. We were going back to school on the morrow. As I turned away, Harriet Roe passed, her pink ribbons and her cheap gay silk dress gleaming in the sunlight. She stared at me, and I stared back again. And now, the explanation of matters being over, the real story begins. But I shall have to tell some of it as it was told by others.

The tea-things waited on Mrs. Lease's table in the afternoon ; waited for Daniel Ferrar. He had left them shortly before to go and attend to his poultry. Nothing had been said about his coming back for tea : that he would do so had been looked upon as a matter of course. But he did not make his appearance, and the tea was taken without him. At half-past five the church-bell rang out for evening service, and Maria put her things on. Mrs. Lease did not go out at night.

“ You are starting early, Maria. You'll be in church before other people.”

“ That won't matter, mother.”

A jealous suspicion lay on Maria—that the secret of Daniel Ferrar's non-return was his having fallen in with Harriet Roe : perhaps had gone of his own accord to seek her. She

walked slowly along. The gloom of dusk, and a deep dusk, had stolen over the evening, but the moon would be up later. As Maria passed the school-house, she halted to glance in at the little sitting-room window; the shutters were not closed yet, and the room was lighted by the blazing fire. Harriet was not there. She only saw Miss Timmens, the mistress, who was putting on her bonnet before a hand-glass propped upright on the mantel-piece. Without warning, Miss Timmens turned and threw open the window. It was only for the purpose of pulling-to the shutters, but Maria thought she must have been observed, and spoke.

“Good evening, Miss Timmens.”

“Who is it?” cried out Miss Timmens in answer, peering into the dusk. “Oh, it’s you, is it, Maria Lease! Have you seen anything of Harriet? She went off somewhere this afternoon, and never came in to tea.”

“I have not seen her.”

“She’s gone to the Batleys’, I’ll be bound. She knows I don’t like her to be with the Batley girls; they make her ten times flightier than she would otherwise be.”

Miss Timmens drew in her shutters with a jerk, without which they would not close, and Maria Lease turned away.

“Not at the Batleys’, not at the Batleys’, but with *him*,” she cried, in bitter rebellion, as she turned away from the church. From the

church, not to it. Was Maria to blame for wishing to see whether she was right or not?—for walking about a little in the thought of meeting them? At any rate it is what she did. And had her reward; such as it was.

As she was passing the top of the withy walk, their voices reached her ear. People often walked there, and it was one of the ways to South Crabb. Maria drew back amidst the trees, and they came on: Harriet Roe and Daniel Ferrar, walking arm-in-arm.

"I think I had better take it off," Harriet was saying. "No need to invoke a storm upon my head. And that would come in a shower of hail from stiff old Aunt Timmens."

The answer seemed one of quick assent, but Ferrar spoke low. Maria Lease had hard work to control herself: anger, passion, jealousy, all blazed up. With her arms stretched out to a friendly tree on either side,—with her heart beating,—with her pulses coursing on to fever-heat, she watched them across the bit of common to the road. Harriet went one way then; he another, in the direction of Mrs. Lease's cottage. No doubt to fetch her—Maria—to church, with a plausible plea of having been detained. Until now she had had no proof of his falsity; had never perfectly believed in it.

She took her arms from the trees and went forward, a sharp faint cry of despair breaking forth on the night air. Maria Lease was one

of those silent-natured girls who can never speak of a wrong like this. She had to bury it within her ; down, down, out of sight and show ; and she went into church with her usual quiet step. Harriet Roe with Miss Timmens came next, quite demure, as if she had been singing some of the infant scholars to sleep at their own homes. Daniel Ferrar did not go to church at all : he stayed, as was found afterwards, with Mrs. Lease.

Maria might as well have been at home as at church : better perhaps that she had been. Not a syllable of the service did she hear : her brain was a sea of confusion ; the tumult within it rising higher and higher. She did not hear even the text, “ Peace, be still,” or the sermon ; both so singularly appropriate. The passions in men’s minds, the preacher said, raged and foamed just like the angry waves of the sea in a storm, until Jesus came to still them.

I ran after Maria when church was over, and went in to pay the promised visit to old Mother Lease. Daniel Ferrar was sitting in the parlour. He got up and offered Maria a chair at the fire, but she turned her back and stood at the table under the window, taking off her gloves. An open Bible was before Mrs. Lease : I wondered whether she had been reading aloud to Daniel.

“ What was the text, child ? ” asked the old lady.

No answer.

"Do you hear, Maria? What was the text?"

Maria turned at that, as if suddenly awakened. Her face was white; her eyes had in them an uncertain terror.

"The text?" she stammered. "I—I forgot it, mother. It was from Genesis, I think."

"Was it, Master Johnny?"

"It was from the fourth chapter of St. Mark, 'Peace, be still.'"

Mrs. Lease stared at me. "Why, that is the very chapter I've been reading. Well now, that's curious. But there's never a better in the Bible, and never a better text was taken from it than those three words. I have been telling Daniel here, Master Johnny, that when once that peace, Christ's peace, is got into the heart, storms can't hurt us much. And you are going away again to-morrow, sir?" she added after a pause. "It's a short stay."

I was not going away on the morrow. Tod and I, taking the Squire in a genial moment after dinner, had pressed to be let stay until Tuesday, Tod using the argument, and laughing while he did it, that it must be wrong to travel on All Saints' Day, when the parson had specially enjoined us to be at church. The Squire told us we were a couple of encroaching rascals, and if he did let us stay it should be upon condition that we did go to church. This I said to them.

"He may send you all the same, sir, when the morning comes," remarked Daniel Ferrar.

"Knowing Mr. Todhetley as you do, Ferrar, you may remember that he never breaks his promises."

Daniel laughed. "He grumbles over them, though, Master Johnny."

"Well, he may grumble to-morrow over our staying, say it is wasting the time that ought to be spent in study, but he will not send us back until Tuesday."

Until Tuesday! If I could have foreseen then what would have happened before Tuesday! If all of us could have foreseen! Seen the few hours between now and then depicted, as in a mirror, event by event! Would it have saved the calamity, the dreadful sin that could never be redeemed? Why, yes; surely it would. Daniel Ferrar turned round and looked at Maria.

"Why don't you come to the fire?"

"I am very well here, thank you."

She had sat down where she was, her bonnet against the curtain. Mrs. Lease, not noticing that anything was amiss, had begun talking about Lena, whose illness was turning to low fever, when the house door opened and Harriet Roe came in.

"What a lovely night it is!" she said, taking, of her own accord, the chair I had not cared to take, for I kept saying I must go.

“ Maria, what went with you after church ? I was hunting for you everywhere.”

Maria gave no answer. She looked black and angry ; and her chest heaved as if a storm were brewing. Maria Roe slightly laughed.

“ Do you intend to make holiday to-morrow, Mrs. Lease ? ”

“ Me make holiday ! what is there in to-morrow to make holiday for ? ” returned Mrs. Lease.

“ I shall,” continued Harriet, without answering the question ; “ I have been used to do it in France. All Saints’ Day is a grand holiday there ; we go to church in the best clothes we possess, and pay visits afterwards. Following it, like an ugly shadow, comes the gloomy *Jour des Morts.*”

“ The what ? ” cried Mrs. Lease, bending her ear.

“ The day of the dead. All Souls’ Day. But you English don’t go to the cemeteries to pray.”

Mrs. Lease put on her spectacles, which lay between the open pages of the Bible, and stared at Harriet. Perhaps she thought they might assist her to understand. The girl laughed.

“ On All Souls’ Day, whether it be wet or dry, the French cemeteries are full of kneeling women draped in black ; all praying for the repose of their dead relatives, after the manner of the Roman Catholics.”

Daniel Ferrar, who had not spoken a word since she came in, but sat with his face to the fire, turned round and looked at her. Upon which she tossed back her head and her pink ribbons, and smiled till all her teeth were seen. Good teeth they were. As to reverence in her tone, there was none.

“I have seen them kneeling when the slosh and wet has been up to their ankles. Did you ever see a ghost ?” added she, with energy. “The French believe that the spirits of the dead come abroad on the night of All Saints’ Day. You’d scarcely get a French woman to go out of her house after dusk. It is their chief superstition of all.”

“What is the superstition ?” questioned Mrs. Lease.

“Why, that,” said Harriet. “They believe that the dead are allowed to revisit the world after dark on the Eve of All Souls; and that they hover in the air, waiting to appear to any of their living relatives, who may venture out, lest they should forget to pray on the morrow for their souls’ rest.”*

“Well, I never !” cried Mrs. Lease, staring excessively. “Did you ever hear the like of that, sir ?” turning to me.

“Yes ; I have heard of it.”

Harriet Roe looked up at me ; I was stand-

* The superstition obtains amidst some of the lower orders in France.—ED..

ing at the corner of the mantel-piece. She laughed a free laugh.

“I say, wouldn’t it be fun to go out to-morrow night, and meet the ghosts? Only, perhaps they don’t visit this country, it not being under Rome.”

“Now just you behave yourself before your betters, Harriet Roe,” put in Mrs. Lease, sharply. “That gentleman is young Mr. Ludlow, of Crabb Cot.”

“And very happy I am to make young Mr. Ludlow’s acquaintance,” returned easy Harriet, flinging back her mantle from her shoulders. “How hot your parlour is, Mrs. Lease.”

The fastening hook of the cloak had caught in a thin chain of twisted gold that she wore round her neck, pulling it out to view. She hurriedly folded her cloak together, as if wishing to conceal the chain. But Mrs. Lease’s spectacles had seen it.

“What’s that you’ve got on, Harriet? A gold chain?”

A moment’s pause, and then Harriet Roe flung back her mantle again, a defiant look upon her face, and touched the chain with her hand.

“That’s what it is, Mrs. Lease: a gold chain. And a very pretty one, too.”

“Was it your mother’s?”

“It was never anybody’s but mine. I had it made a present to me this afternoon; for a keepsake.”

Happening to look at Maria, I was startled at her face, it was so white and yet so dark : white with emotion, dark with an angry despair that I for one did not comprehend. Harriet Roe, throwing over to her a look of saucy triumph, went out with as little ceremony as she had come in, just calling back a general good night ; and we heard her footsteps outside getting gradually further away in the distance. Daniel Ferrar rose.

“ I’ll take my departure too, I think. You are very unsociable to-night, Maria.”

“ May be I am. May be I have cause to be.”

She flung his hand back when he held it out ; and in another minute, as if a thought struck her, ran after him into the passage to speak. I, standing near the door in the small room, caught the words.

“ I must have an explanation with you, Daniel Ferrar. Now. To-night. We cannot go on thus for a single hour longer.”

“ Not to-night, Maria : I have no time to spare. And I don’t know what you mean.”

“ You do know. Listen. I’ll not go to my rest, no, though it were for twenty nights to come, until we have had it out. I *vow* I will not. There. You are playing with me. Others have long said so, and I know it now.”

He seemed to speak some quieting words to her ; for the tone was low and soothing, and then went out, shutting the door behind him.

Maria came back and stood with her face and its ghastliness turned from view, her chest heaving. And still the old mother noticed nothing.

“Why don’t you take your things off, Maria?” she asked.

“Presently,” was the answer.

I said good night in my turn, and went away then. Half way home I met Tod with the two young Lexoms. The Lexoms made us go in and stay to supper, and it was ten o’clock before we got away.

“We shall catch it,” said Tod, setting off to run. They never let us stay out late on a Sunday evening, on account of the reading.

But, as it happened, we escaped scot-free this time, for the house was in a commotion about Lena. She had been better in the afternoon, but at nine o’clock the fever returned worse than ever. Her little cheeks and lips were scarlet as she lay on the bed, her wide-open eyes shone bright and glistening. The Squire had gone up to look at her, and was fuming and fretting in his usual fashion.

“The doctor has never sent the medicine,” said patient Mrs. Todhetley, who must have been worn out with nursing. “She ought to take it; I am sure she ought.”

“These boys are good to run over to Cole’s for that,” cried the Squire. “It won’t hurt them; it’s a fine night.”

Of course we were good for it. And got our caps again ; being charged to enjoin Mr. Cole to come over the first thing in the morning.

“ Do you care much about my going with you, Johnny ? ” Tod asked as we were turning out at the door. “ I am awfully tired.”

“ Not a bit. I’d as soon go alone as in company. You’ll see me back in half an hour.”

I took the nearest way ; flying across the fields at a canter, and startling the hares. Mr. Cole lived near South Crabb, and I don’t believe more than ten minutes had gone by when I knocked at his door. But to get back as quickly was another thing. The doctor was not at home. He had been called out to a patient at eight o’clock, and had not yet returned.

I went in to wait : the servant said he might be expected to come in from minute to minute. It was of no use to go away without the medicine ; and I sat down in the surgery in front of the shelves, and fell asleep counting the white jars and physic bottles. The doctor’s entrance awoke me.

“ I am sorry you should have had to come over and to wait,” he said. “ When my other patient, with whom I was detained a considerable time, was done with, I went on to Crabb Cot with the child’s medicine, which I had in my pocket.”

“ They think her very ill to-night, sir.”

“ I left her better, and going quietly to sleep. She will soon be well, I hope.”

“ Why ! is that the time ? ” I exclaimed, happening to catch sight of the clock as I was crossing the hall. It was nearly twelve. Mr. Cole laughed, saying time passed quickly when folks were asleep.

I went back slowly. The sleep, or the canter thither, had made me feel as tired as Tod said he was. It was a night to be abroad in and to enjoy ; calm, warm, light. The moon, high in the sky, sent her rays on every blade of grass ; they sparkled on the water of the little rivulet ; they brought out the moss on the grey walls of the old church ; they played on its round-faced clock, then striking twelve.

Twelve o’clock at night at North Crabb answers to about three in the morning in London, for country people are mostly abed and asleep at ten. Therefore, when loud and angry voices struck up in dispute, just as the last stroke of the hour was dying away on the midnight air, I stood still and did not believe my ears.

I was getting near home then. The sounds came from the back of a building standing by itself in a solitary place on the left-hand side of the road. It belonged to the Squire, and was called the yellow barn, its walls being covered with yellow-wash ; but it was in fact a granary, used as a store-house for corn. I was passing in front of it when the voices rose. Round the building I ran, and saw—Maria Lease : and

something else that I could not at first comprehend. In the pursuit of her vow, not to go to rest until she had "had it out" with Daniel Ferrar, Maria had been abroad searching for him. What ill fate brought her looking for him up by our barn?—perhaps because she had looked fruitlessly in every other spot.

At the back of this barn, up some steps, was an unused door. Unused partly because it was not required, the principal entrance being in front; partly because the key of it had been for a long while missing. Stealing out at this door, a bag of corn upon his shoulders, had come Daniel Ferrar in a smock-frock. Maria saw him, and stood back in the shade. She watched him lock the door and conceal the key in his pocket; she watched him give the heavy bag a jerk as he turned to come down the steps. Then she burst out. Her shrieking reproaches petrified him, and he stood there as one suddenly turned to stone. It was at that moment that I appeared.

I understood it all soon; it needed not Maria's words to enlighten me. Daniel Ferrar possessed the lost key and could come in and out at will in the midnight hours when the world was safe, and help himself to the corn. No wonder his poultry throve: no wonder there had been grumblings at Crabb Cot at the mysterious disappearance of the good grain.

Maria Lease was decidedly mad in those few

first moments. Stealing is looked upon in an honest village as an awful thing ; a disgrace, a crime ; and there was the night's previous misery besides. Daniel Ferrar was a thief ! Daniel Ferrar was false to her ! The storm of words and reproaches poured forth from her in confusion, none very distinct. “Living upon theft ! Convicted felon ! Transportation for life ! Squire Todhetley's corn ! Fattening poultry on stolen goods ! Buying gold chains with the profits for that bold flaunting French girl, Harriet Roe ! Taking his stealthy walks with her !”

My going up stopped the charge. There was a pause ; and then Maria, in her mad passion, denounced him to me, as representative (it was how she put it) of the Squire—the breaker-in of our premises ! the robber of our stored corn !

Daniel Ferrar came down the steps ; he had remained there still as a statue, immovable ; and turned his white face to me. Never a word in defence said he : the blow had crushed him ; he was a proud man (if anybody can understand that), and to be discovered in this ill-doing was worse than death.

“Don't think of me more hardly than you can help, Master Johnny,” he said in a still tone. “I have been almost tired of my life this long while.”

Putting down the bag of corn by the steps, he took the key from his pocket and handed it

to me. The man's aspect had so changed ; there was something so grievously subdued and sad about him altogether, that I felt as sorry for him as if he had not been guilty. Maria Lease went on in her fierce passion.

" You'll be more tired of it to-morrow when the police are dragging you to Worcester gaol. Squire Todhetley will not spare you, though your father was his many-year bailiff. He could not, you know, if he wished ; Master Ludlow has seen you in the act."

" Let me have the key again for a minute, sir," he said, as quietly as though he did not hear a word. And I gave it to him. I'm not sure but I should have given him my head had he asked for it.

He swung the bag on his shoulders, unlocked the granary door, and put the bag by the side of the other sacks. The bag was his own, as we found afterwards, but he left it. Locking the door again, he gave me the key, and went away with a weary step.

" Good-bye, Master Johnny."

I answered back a good-night civilly, though he had been stealing. When he was out of sight, Maria Lease, her passion full upon her still, dashed off towards her mother's cottage, a strange cry of despair breaking from her lips.

" Where have you been lingering, Johnny ? " roared the Squire, who was sitting up for me. " You have been throwing at the owls, sir, that's

what you've been at ; you have been scudding after the hares."

I said I had waited for Mr. Cole, and had come back slower than I went ; but I said no more, and went up to my room at once. And the Squire went to his.

I know I am only a muff ; people tell me so, often : but I can't help it ; I did not make myself. I lay awake till nearly daylight, first wishing Daniel Ferrar could be screened, and then thinking it might perhaps be done. If he would only take the lesson to profit and go on straight for the future, what a capital thing it would be. We had liked old Ferrar ; he did me and Tod many a good turn : and, for the matter of that, we liked Daniel. So I never said a word when morning came of the past night's work.

"Is Daniel at home ?" I asked, going to Ferrar's the first thing before breakfast. I meant to tell him that if he would keep right, I would keep counsel.

"He went out at dawn, sir," answered the old woman who did for him, and sold his poultry at market. "He'll be in presently : he have had no breakfast yet."

"Then tell him, when he comes, to wait in, and see me : tell him it's all right. Can you remember, Goody ? 'It is all right.'"

"I'll remember, safe enough, Master Ludlow."

Tod and I, being on our honour, went to

church, and found about ten people in the pews. Harriet Roe was one, with her pink ribbons, and the twisted gold chain hanging outside a short-cut velvet jacket.

“No, sir; he has not been home yet; I can’t think where he can have got to,” was the old Goody’s reply when I went again to Ferrar’s. And so I wrote a word in pencil, and told her to give it him when he came in, for I could not go dodging there every hour in the day.

After luncheon, in strolling along by the back of the barn, a certain reminiscence I suppose taking me there, for it was not a frequented spot, I saw Maria Lease coming along.

Well, it was a change! The passionate woman of the previous night had subsided into a poor, wild-looking, sorrow-stricken thing, ready to die of remorse. The excessive passion had wrought its usual consequences; a re-action: a re-action in favour of Daniel Ferrar. She came up to me, clasping her hands in beseeching agony—that I would spare him; that I would not tell of him; that I would give him a chance for the future: and her lips quivered and trembled, and there were dark circles round her hollow eyes.

I said that I had not told and did not intend to tell. Upon which she was going to fall down on her knees with thanks, but I rushed off.

“Do you know where he is?” I asked, when she came to her sober senses.

“ Oh, I wish I did know ! Master Johnny, he is just the man to go and do something desperate. He would never face shame ; and I was a mad, hard-hearted, wicked girl to do what I did last night. He might run away to sea ; he might go and enlist for a soldier.”

“ I dare say he is at home by this time. I have left a word for him there, and promised to go in and see him to-night. If he will undertake not to be up to wrong things again, nobody shall ever know of this from me.”

She went away easier, and I sauntered on towards South Crabb. Eager as Tod and I had been for the day’s holiday, it did not seem to be turning out much of a boon. In going home again—there was nothing worth staying out for—I had come to about the spot by the three-cornered grove where I saw Maria, when a galloping policeman overtook me. My heart stood still ; for I thought he must have come after Daniel Ferrar.

“ Can you tell me if I am near to Crabb Cot—Squire Todhetley’s ?” he asked, reining-in his fast horse.

“ You will come to it in a minute or two. I live there. Squire Todhetley is not at home. What do you want with him ?”

“ It’s only to give in an official paper, sir. I have to leave one personally upon all the county magistrates.”

He rode on. When I got in I saw the folded

paper upon the hall-table ; the man and horse had already gone onwards. It was worse indoors than out ; less to be done. Tod had disappeared after church ; the Squire was abroad ; Mrs. Todhetley sat up stairs with Lena : and I strolled out again. It was only three o'clock then.

An hour, or more, was got through somehow : meeting one, talking to another, throwing at the ducks and geese ; anything. Mrs. Lease had her head (smothered in a yellow shawl) stretched out over the palings as I passed her cottage.

“Don’t catch cold, mother.”

“I am looking for Maria, sir. I can’t think what has come to her to-day, Master Johnny,” she added, dropping her voice to a confidential tone. “The girl seems demented : she has been going in and out since daylight like a dog in a fair.”

“If I meet her I will send her home.”

And in another minute I did meet her. For she was coming out of Daniel Ferrar’s yard. I supposed he was at home.

“No,” she said, looking more wild, worn, haggard than before ; “that’s what I have been to ask. I am just out of my senses, sir. He is gone for certain. Gone !”

I did not think it. He would not be likely to go away without clothes.

“Well, I know he is, Master Johnny ; something tells it me. I’ve been all about every-

where. There's a great dread upon me, sir ; I never felt anything like it."

"Wait until night, Maria ; I dare say he will go home then. Your mother is looking out for you ; I said if I met you I'd send you in."

Mechanically she turned to the cottage, and I went on. Presently, as I was sitting on a gate watching the sunset, Harriet Roe passed towards the withy walk, and gave me a nod in her free but good-natured way.

"Are you going down there to look out for the ghosts this evening ?" I asked : and I wished not long afterwards I had not said it. "It will soon be dusk."

"So it will," she said, turning to the red western sky. "But I have no time to give to the ghosts to-night."

"Have you seen Ferrar to-day ?" I cried, an idea occurring to me.

"No. And I can't think where he has got to ; unless he is off to Worcester. He told me he should have to go there some day this week."

She evidently knew nothing of him, and went on her way with another free-and-easy nod. I sat on the gate till the sun had gone down, and then thought it was time to be getting homewards.

Close against the yellow barn, the scene of last night's trouble, whom should I come upon but Maria Lease. She was standing still, and turned quickly at the sound of my footsteps. Her

face was bright again, but had a puzzled look upon it.

"I have just seen him ; he is not gone," she said in a glad whisper. "You were right, Master Johnny, and I was wrong."

"Where did you see him ?"

"Here ; not a minute ago. I saw him twice. He is angry, very, and will not let me speak to him ; both times he got away before I could reach him. He is close by somewhere."

I looked round, naturally ; but Ferrar was nowhere to be seen. There was nothing to hide him except the barn, and that was locked up. The account she gave was this—and her face grew puzzled again as she related it.

Unable to rest indoors, she had wandered up here again, and saw Ferrar standing at the front corner of the barn, looking very hard at her. She thought he was waiting for her to come up, but before she got close to him he had disappeared, and she did not see which way. She hastened past the front of the barn, ran round to the back, and there he was. He stood near the steps, looking out for her ; waiting for her, as it again seemed ; and was gazing at her with the same fixed, hard stare. But again she missed him before she could get quite up ; and it was at that moment that I arrived on the scene.

I went all round the barn, but could see nothing of Ferrar. It was an extraordinary thing where he could have got to. Inside the

barn he could not be : it was securely locked ; and there was no appearance of him in the open country. It was, so to say, broad daylight yet, or at least not far short of it ; the red light was still in the western sky. Beyond the field at the back of the barn, was a grove of trees in the form of a triangle ; and this grove was flanked by Crabb Ravine, which ran right and left. Crabb Ravine had the reputation of being haunted ; for a light was sometimes seen dodging about its deep descending banks at night that nobody could account for. A lively spot altogether for those who liked gloom.

“ Are you sure it was Ferrar, Maria ? ”

“ Sure ! ” she returned in surprise at the doubt. “ You don’t think I could mistake him, Master Johnny, do you ? He wore that ugly seal-skin winter-cap of his tied over his ears, and his thick grey coat. The coat was buttoned closely round him. I have not seen him wear either since last winter.”

That Ferrar must have gone into hiding somewhere seemed quite evident ; and yet there was nothing but the ground for him to hide in. Maria said she lost sight of him the last time in a moment ; both times in fact ; and it was absolutely impossible that he could have made off to the triangle, or elsewhere, as she must have seen him cross the open land. For that matter I must have seen him too.

On the whole, not two minutes had elapsed

since I came up, though it seems to have been longer in telling it : when, before we could look further, voices were heard approaching from the direction of Crabb Cot ; and Maria, not caring to be seen, went away quickly. I was still in the puzzle about Ferrar's hiding place, when they reached me—the Squire, Tod, and two or three men. Tod came slowly up, his face dark and grave.

“I say, Johnny, what a shocking thing this is !”

“What is a shocking thing ?”

“You have not heard of it ?—But I don't see how you could hear.”

I had heard nothing. I did not know what there was to hear. Tod told me in a whisper.

“Daniel Ferrar's dead, lad.”

“What ?”

“He has destroyed himself. Not more than half an hour ago. Hung himself in the grove.”

I turned sick, taking one thing with another, comparing this recollection with that ; which I daresay you will think nobody but a muff would do.

Ferrar was indeed dead. He had been hiding all day in the three-cornered grove : perhaps waiting for the night to get away—perhaps only waiting for the night to go home again. Who can tell ? About half-past two, Luke Macintosh, a man who worked sometimes for us, sometimes

for old Coney, happening to go through the grove, saw him there, and talked with him. The same man, passing back a little before sunset, found him hanging to a tree, dead. Macintosh ran with the news to Crabb Cot, and they were now flocking to the scene. When facts came to be examined there appeared only too much reason to think that the unfortunate appearance of the galloping policeman had terrified Ferrar into the act; perhaps—we all hoped it!—had scared his senses quite away. Look at it as we would, it was very dreadful.

But what of the appearance Maria Lease saw? At that time, Ferrar had been dead at least half an hour. Was it reality or delusion? That is (as the Squire put it), did her eyes see a real, spectral Daniel Ferrar; or were they deceived by some imagination of the brain? Opinions were divided. Nothing can shake her own steadfast belief in its reality; to her it remains an awful certainty, true and sure as heaven.

If I say that I believe in it too, I shall be called a muff and a double muff. But there is one stumbling-block difficult to get over. Ferrar, when found, was wearing the seal-skin cap tied over the ears and the thick grey coat buttoned up round him, just as Maria Lease described to me; and he had never put them on since the previous winter, or taken them out of the chest where they were kept. The old woman

at his home did not know he had done it then. When told that he died in these things, she protested that they were in the chest, and ran up to look for them. But the things were gone.

END OF VOL. II.

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